Jonathan

ROSENBAUM

Essential Cinema

On the Necessity of Film Canons

With a new Afterword

VISIT…

Essential Cinema

Books by Jonathan Rosenbaum

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Essential Cinema

On the Necessity *of* Film Canons

Jonathan Rosenbaum

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction xi

I. CLASSICS

Fables of the Reconstruction: The Four-Hour *Greed* 3
Fascinating Rhythms: *M* 13
The Color of Paradise: *Jour de fête* 19
Backyard Ethics: Hitchcock's *Rear Window* 26
Songs in the Key of Everyday Life: *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* 32
A Tale of the Wind: Joris Ivens's Last Testament 38
Kira Muratova's Home Truths: *The Asthenic Syndrome* 43
The Importance of Being Sarcastic: *Sátántangó* 48
Blush 53
The Ceremony 58
Thieves 62
True Grit: *Rosetta* 67

II. SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Malick's Progress 75
Improvisations and Interactions in Altmanville, with an Afterword: *Nashville* 80
Mixed Emotions: *Breaking the Waves* 95
Fast, Cheap & Out of Control 101
The Sweet Cheat: *Time Regained* 105
James Benning's *Four Corners* 113
Overrated Solutions: *L'humanité* 119
The Sound of German: Straub-Huillet's *The Death of Empedocles* 123
Beyond the Clouds: Return to Beauty 130
Reality and History as the Apotheosis of Southern Sleaze: Phil Karlson's *The Phenix City Story* 136
Is Ozu Slow? 146
The Human Touch: *Decalogue* and *Fargo* 152

III. OTHER CANONS, OTHER CANONIZERS

Life Intimidates Art: *Irma Vep* 163
Stanley Kwan's *Actress:* Writing History in Quicksand 170
Critical Distance: Godard's *Contempt* 179
Remember Amnesia? (Guy Maddin's *Archangel*), with an Afterword: Ten Years Later (Please Watch Carefully: *The Heart of the World*) 187
Ragged but Right: Rivette's *Up Down Fragile* 194
Critic with a Camera: Marker on Tarkovsky 199
Riddles of a Sphinx: *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* 204
International Harvest: National Film Histories on Video 210
International Sampler: *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* 216
Not the Same Old Song and Dance: *The Young Girls of Rochefort* 223
Flaming Creatures and *Scotch Tape* 230
Ruiz Hopping and Buried Treasures: Twelve Selected Global Sites 236

IV. DISPUTABLE CONTENDERS

Back in Style: Bertolucci's *Besieged* 251
The Young One: Buñuel's Neglected Masterpiece 257
In Dreams Begin Responsibilities: Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* 262
The Best of Both Worlds: *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* 271
Under the Chador: *The Day I Became a Woman* 280
Chains of Ignorance: Charles Burnett's *Nightjohn* 285
Good Vibrations: *Waking Life* 291
Hell on Wheels: *Taxi Driver* 295
Meat, John, Dough: *Pretty Woman* 302
Tashlinesque 306
Weird and Wonderful: Takeshi Kitano's *Kikujiro* 313
**Corpus Callosum* 317

V. FILMMAKERS

Mann of the West 321
Otto Preminger 326
Nicholas Ray 334
Exiles in Modernity: Films by Edward Yang 338
Hou Hsiao-hsien: Becoming Taiwanese 346
The Countercultural Histories of Rudy Wurlitzer 351
Samuel Fuller: The Words of an Innocent Warrior 357
The Mysterious Elaine May: Hiding in Plain Sight 364
Visionary Agitprop: *I Am Cuba* 370
The Battle over Orson Welles 376

License to Feel: *Distant Voices, Still Lives* and *The Neon Bible* 386
Death and Life: Landscapes of the Soul—The Cinema of Alexander Dovzhenko 399

Appendix: 1,000 Favorites (A Personal Canon) 407

Index 427

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Introduction

As the son and grandson of small-town exhibitors—a legacy explored in detail in my first book, *Moving Places: A Life at the Movies* (1980; revised ed., 1995)—I find it difficult to pinpoint with any exactitude when my film education started. But I can recall two pivotal events from my freshman year at New York University in 1961, when I was an English major still aspiring to become a professional novelist: taking the first and only film course I've ever had in my life and purchasing my first film magazine.

The course was an introductory survey taught by the late Haig Manoogian, who was serving as Martin Scorsese's mentor in production courses at NYU around the same time. For me, Manoogian's class mainly afforded an opportunity to see *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Last Laugh*, and a few other film history staples; since I had no interest in making movies—or at this point in writing about them—I couldn't work up much enthusiasm for such matters as "story values" that Manoogian tended to emphasize. I was also skeptical about the inclusion in the curriculum of the 40s movie *Champion*—something I'd already seen in the 50s as a revival at one of my family's theaters—and the exclusion of *Citizen Kane*, which I'd seen a year or so earlier at boarding school in Vermont. When I asked Manoogian about this omission after class one day, he reiterated the standard line about *Kane* that I'd already encountered in Arthur Knight's *The Liveliest Art* and Paul Rotha and Richard Griffith's *The Film Till Now*, two of the few standard reference books available at the time—that Orson Welles's film was basically uncinematic and therefore impressive only to amateurs who understood little about the medium. (It took me years to grasp that Knight, Griffith, and Manoogian were all American film industry apologists to varying degrees and that their hostility toward *Kane* probably bore some relation to this position, at least during the 50s and 60s—when the film was still perceived chiefly as being in opposition to the industry, before Pauline Kael maintained it was just another newspaper comedy.) In any event, this position was so irritating to me at the time that I got Manoogian's permission to call my final paper "In Defense of *Citizen Kane*" and won a grudging B+ for my extended polemical efforts. (A few portions of this paper wound up getting recycled in my first extended article for *Film Comment*—a review of Kael's "Raising *Kane*.")[1]

In the long as well as the short run, though, the film magazine I purchased proved to be much more consequential in developing my taste in film. It was the winter 1961–62 issue of *Sight and Sound*, and I bought it partly because it had reviews of films I'd recently been seeing or hearing about in New York, such as *Last Year at Marienbad* and *La notte*. (By this time, I'd already given myself a crash course in the French New Wave and the Italian film renaissance on my trips to and through New York during my two years at boarding school.) But the bonus in that particular issue was the results of an international poll of film critics concerning the greatest films ever made. *Citizen Kane*, I was happy to discover, placed first, and I was astonished to discover in second place *L'avventura*—a film by Michelangelo Antonioni that preceded *La notte* and that I had only just discovered and was still trying to process. Determined to learn more about film history than Manoogian's course could offer, I vowed to see as many films on the list as I could, and for the next several years proceeded like a butterfly collector, dutifully underlining each title in that issue of *Sight and Sound* as soon as I'd seen the film. It was a better way of surveying the lay of the land, I quickly discovered, than the indexes of Knight or of Rotha and Griffith, because it guided me toward objects of critical veneration more than historical markers—objects that would eventually be joined by those found in Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema* and Noël Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*, among other essential guidebooks—and because, as I used the list to make my own discoveries, it involved me more directly in the process of forming my own values and tastes. Some critical favorites on the list proved to be disappointments, others were greater than I had even hoped for, but in both cases these responses represented not so much end points as the beginnings of evaluations and reevaluations that would continue over decades and that are still taking place.

Academic film study had barely started by then, and several years would pass before I was informed that ranking movies qualitatively, in a canonical manner, was foolish and naïve—that I was subscribing to myths about solitary geniuses and timeless art that only revealed how provincial I was. Further down the road, these objections became amplified by arguments about dead white males and bourgeois complacency, though by the time these came along, I'm afraid the damage to me had already been done: in 1968 I had quit graduate school to accept the job of editing a book of film criticism and, by the next year, I had moved from New York to Paris. During all this period I stuck to the *Sight and Sound* list and others like it in order to carry out my self-education in film. Little did I realize that by seeing all these films willy-nilly and helter-skelter at the Paris Cinémathèque and elsewhere, I was fleeing from various theoretical and sociological considerations and simply having too much irresponsible fun by finding pleasure in most of what I saw.

Roughly a quarter of a century later, while I was putting together a proposal for an initial collection of my film criticism at the invitation of an editor at the University of California Press, Ed Dimendberg, I outlined a section entitled "Masterpieces," which Ed urged me to change to "Touchstones." The sort of arguments that made the very notion of a masterpiece academically unacceptable by the mid-90s can't be easily synopsized, but I don't think it would be misleading to say that a fundamental distrust of art, often unacknowledged as such, played a significant role in this unraveling. Indeed, the unraveling of literary canons over the same period in what used to be my own academic field has ultimately proved to be even more decisive in certain ways, making me all the more happy that I had opted for journalism over teaching in the late 60s. The havoc wreaked on literary studies through the virtual outlawing of canons has been discussed at some length by Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon*,[2] and although Bloom has inspired as well as informed some of my own strategies in the present collection, I should stress at the outset some major differences in our assumptions and approaches. Most of them can be summed up by the following list:

1. The cinematic canon I'm proposing is not Western—unlike the unacknowledged canons currently ruling film culture, which I'll speak about shortly and which are all unabashedly Western and North American. I can't see much merit in perpetuating such a habit, especially in an art and medium such as film that is ruled by linguistic differences considerably less than literature is.

2. My canon, unlike Bloom's, is not founded exclusively on aesthetic considerations. For far too long, in my opinion, an overall consumerist orientation in our culture has dictated the assumption that all films can be categorized as either art or entertainment—a needlessly restrictive notion that has lasted as long as it has only because it has rarely been examined. The fact is, for instance, that at a time when images of Iranians in the mass media are almost invariably reductive stereotypes, and images of Iranians in many Iranian films are more varied and accurate, this alone gives Iranian films a certain value apart from their credentials as art and/or entertainment—an informational value that we can't afford to ignore, even though we haven't yet learned how to validate this material for such a reason.

3. Unlike Bloom, I regard canon formation as an active process of selection rather than a passive one of *reportage*. Compared to the history of literature, the history of film is minuscule, and one could argue as a consequence that it's much too early to speak about film canons in the same way we might speak about literary canons. I would certainly agree with this premise. However, Bloom—asserting that "cultural prophecy is always a mug's game" and that "critics do not make canons, any more than resentful networks [deriving from what Bloom calls

a "School of Resentment"] can create them"—generally treats literary canons as descriptive rather than prescriptive.[3] My treatment of film canons reverses this position. I should add that Bloom's avoidance of such matters as market considerations that dictate what books get reprinted and why limit for me the value of his descriptive approach.

4. Consequently, I differ with Bloom's view of the political and social aspects of canonizing. "Cultural criticism is another dismal social science," Bloom writes, "but literary criticism, as an art, always was and always will be an elitist phenomenon."[4] My assumption is that criticism can include cultural as well as literary (and film) criticism, and that all these forms of criticism can be either elitist or populist. Furthermore, notwithstanding Bloom's caveat that art doesn't make people into better citizens, I would argue that information can on occasion do precisely that and that art and information never can and never should be viewed as wholly independent entities. Bearing all this in mind, the film canon proposed at the end of this book can't be limited simply or exclusively to art, entertainment, information, communication, or models of thought or perception, although all these categories are applicable at one time or another. Insofar as books and printed matter in general can't be limited to art and entertainment, it would be both presumptuous and self-defeating to claim such a limitation comparable for everything that exists on film. Thus the value of film canons can't be limited to a need for priorities involving art and entertainment, even if these priorities understandably tend to dominate our discussions of film, my own included.

When I describe a particular issue of *Sight and Sound* as being "more consequential" in the development of my film taste than an introductory film course at NYU, I don't mean to imply that the former proposed a particular film canon while the latter didn't. Indeed, despite the frequent—or at least implicit—claim of film professors that they don't buy into the canon-formation game, I would argue, on the contrary, that canons have never left us; all that's really happened is that we no longer acknowledge their existence and academics no longer play a conscious and active role in promoting them.[5]

I suspect that part of what turned many academics against canons was the threat posed by one particular canon, formulated by an American film critic who subsequently became an academic himself, Andrew Sarris. It's hard to overestimate the multifaceted impact of Sarris's *The American Cinema* when it first appeared during the 60s—initially in the pages of an "underground" New York magazine called *Film Culture* and subsequently as a revised and expanded book. Here, in one fell swoop, was not so much an evaluative reordering and fresh

ranking of the directors of Hollywood features as a grand gesture declaring that it was meaningful to order, rank, and classify them in the first place, with directorial style taking precedence over other considerations. The threat posed to critics outside academia was so palpable that most of their readers first heard about Sarris's so-called auteur theory only when it was attacked—most famously by Pauline Kael in the pages of *Film Quarterly*,[6] but also by Dwight Macdonald, the film critic for *Esquire*, who was so incensed when he learned that Sarris had also been brought on as a contributor to *Film Quarterly*'s "Films of the Quarter" feature that he promptly resigned from the same forum.

Inside academia, Sarris's implied program was much more widely embraced, at least initially, as a way of defining and organizing the syllabus for film courses, and it wasn't long before more theoretically inclined film academics such as Peter Wollen were proposing theoretically upgraded versions of the auteur theory.[7] But eventually Sarris's methodology began to be mistrusted as too facile, too romantic, too apolitical, too redolent of film buffery, and too much grounded in art as opposed to the social sciences. The bias toward art was especially significant insofar as Sarris was himself reacting against some of the social and political inflections of previous film writers such as Lewis Jacobs and Siegfried Kracauer, preferring the more obvious cinephilia of André Bazin and his disciples at *Cahiers du cinéma*, which he regarded as a more useful, pleasure-oriented, *and* energizing critical model. Paradoxically, the writer whose critical authority ultimately superseded that of both Sarris and Bazin in academic circles, Roland Barthes, was pleasure-seeking and energizing in his own right, but not in relation to film; if anything, Barthes's relative distrust of film pleasure is what seemed to recommend him to film academics over everything else.

Having taught film for well over a decade myself, I can certainly see where part of this distrust of pleasure comes from, even after one rules out (as one shouldn't) the puritanical factors that make this distrust quintessentially American: the frivolous associations made with movies, fostered by the studios and related institutions, such as those involving fans. For it's worth stressing that during the same time that academic film study was canonizing theorists rather than films and filmmakers, the latter two were being canonized in increasingly frivolous ways by the various promotional arms of the studios—starting with the Academy Awards, which have become increasingly prominent over the years, and continuing with the practice, begun in the 80s, of listing the biggest box-office grossers week after week in newspapers, in magazines, and on TV.

In both these cases, popularity contests as largely determined—sometimes misleadingly or erroneously—by box-office receipts have constituted the only film canons taken seriously in American culture. And the disinclination of American

film academics to offer any alternative canons has continued to give the industry an unchallenged playing field, assisted by such recent promotional campaigns as the American Film Institute's various polls that list the one hundred greatest American films, stars, comedies, and so on. The restriction of such lists to Hollywood features only begins to describe the promotional aims of promoting particular products coming exclusively from the studios, mainly within the narrow range of what's already out on the market and readily available. To cite only one random example, my own choice for the greatest American film comedy, Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*, was missing from the five hundred candidates proposed by the AFI on their ballot, presumably because it qualified too clearly as independent—or else because the people drawing up the ballot were unfamiliar with it, which perhaps comes down to the same thing.[8]

It's frequently remarked nowadays that young people know next to nothing about the classics of American cinema—for instance, the westerns of John Ford and Howard Hawks; crime pictures of the 30s; horror films produced by Val Lewton; or the comedies of Chaplin, Keaton, and Preston Sturges. What's much less frequently remarked upon is why this should be the case, particularly in relation to previous generations. Merely citing the absence of canons, apart from those put together by ill-informed studio publicists (who typically don't even have a clear sense of what could be found in the studio vaults), doesn't suffice to account for the problem, which has only been made worse by the decimation of state funding for the arts, the downgrading of film discourse in general (both within the journalistic sectors, which increasingly prefer promotion to criticism, and within the academic sectors, which increasingly prefer the social sciences to art), and the cheap nostalgia of older film fans who refuse to examine or interrogate the current situation any further than arrogantly declaring their own generation and its canons superior to any of those succeeding them.

One fortunate development in recent years that has the potential for breaking down some of the barriers that keep academic film study and mainstream film culture in mutual ignorance about and alienated from one another is the DVD "bonus" or "extra feature." Some of the most illuminating scholarly materials concerning film are now being made available to the public on DVDs as supplementary materials through outlets such as Tower Records. I hasten to add that, despite the fact that this book carries a university press imprint, my main stomping ground as a critic has been an alternative weekly, the *Chicago Reader*, where I've been based since 1987—a paper in which I've consciously sought to bridge academic and mainstream perspectives on film. Bearing this context in mind, in the sixty essays gathered in this collection, most of them derived from *Reader* pieces, I've pared away certain journalistic details regarding specific venues that

no longer seem functional, retained others that seem relevant for historical, polemical, and/or rhetorical reasons, and, in some cases, added information, afterthoughts, or updates where these appear to be useful. (I've also eliminated all my original warnings about giving away the plots of certain films.)

Readers of my two previous collections, *Placing Movies* and *Movies as Politics*, as well as *Movie Wars*, will find that some of the arguments or information found here are familiar from those earlier books; indeed, some further redundancies can be found among the sixty pieces in this book. I apologize for the recycling, but sometimes it was difficult to remove these repetitions without disturbing the arguments of the essays in question. I'm afraid this also sometimes applies in the case of filmmakers with whom I deal more than once in this volume—Altman, Davies, Demy, Godard, Kubrick, Maddin, and Ruiz.

In proposing that we—that is, myself and the readers of this book—find ways of recanonizing cinema in order to combat the reductive canons of studio publicists, I've organized this collection around a series of alternate strategies. Most of these strategies can be loosely categorized according to the titles of the book's five sections. "Classics"—another word that is mistrusted in academia nowadays, almost as much as "masterpiece" (though both remain in constant use in mainstream criticism)—starts off by proposing a purely reactionary strategy: the reversion to a "classical" canon that is basically a new and improved version of the ones we used to have when canonizing could still be carried out respectably, that is, beyond the annual ten-best lists of critics and the promotional campaigns of studios and their lackeys (including some critics and professors).

As John Guillory pointed out in a thoughtful essay, the word "classic" has in recent years been displaced (and essentially replaced) by "canon" in the academic world;[9] outside that world, one might add, the term continues to be used without shame or apology. Yet according to most common usages, a film can only be "classic" *or* "canonical" if it's readily available—an assumption that I have sought to challenge with regard to a few of the films in this section.

As this book goes to press, at least five of the films discussed here at length—the color *Jour de fête*, *Sátántángo*, *Blush*, *A Tale of the Wind*, and *The Asthenic Syndrome*—are not readily available in this country, at least not on video. Practically speaking, this would exclude them from most lists that might be used to make up a syllabus or a journalistic roster of recommendations, but this seems to me an absurd criterion for establishing what does or doesn't deserve "classic" status. Consequently I've kept them in, in the hopes that accounts of their importance and relevance might help to make them available again. Indeed, most

traces of the polemical arguments initially used to defend the dozen films examined here have been retained, even when they cite relatively forgotten commercial films that have been mentioned for purposes of comparison or contrast, because the fact that so many of the latter are now barely remembered helps to support those arguments.

Another provocation: five of the films discussed in this section qualify as "golden oldies" by having been made between the 20s and 60s, each one coming from a separate decade (*Greed*, *M*, *Jour de fête*, *Rear Window*, and *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*), but the remaining seven, also discussed in chronological order, all qualify as relatively recent, having been made between 1988 and 1999.

What do we mean—and what do we assume—when we speak about a film classic? My capsule review of *The Bicycle Thief* for the *Chicago Reader*, written on the occasion of a recent rerelease, broaches just a few of the many issues involved:

> An unemployed worker (Lamberto Maggiorani) in postwar Rome finds a job putting up movie posters after his wife pawns the family sheets to get his bicycle out of hock. But right after he starts work the bike is stolen, and with his little boy in tow he travels across the city trying to recover it. This masterpiece—whose Italian title translates as "bicycle thieves"—is generally and correctly known as one of the key works of Italian neorealism, but French critic André Bazin also recognized it as one of the great communist films. (The fact that it received the 1949 Oscar for best foreign film suggests that it wasn't perceived widely as such over here at the time; ironically, the only thing American censors cared about was a scene in which the little boy takes a pee on the street.) The dominance of auteurist criticism over the past three decades has made this extraordinary movie unfashionable because its power doesn't derive from a single creative intelligence, but the work of screenwriter Cesare Zavattini, director Vittorio De Sica, the nonprofessional actors, and many others is so charged with a common purpose that there's no point in even trying to separate their achievements. This is possibly the greatest depiction of a relationship between a father and son in the history of cinema, and it's an awesome heartbreaker. If you set it alongside something like *Life Is Beautiful* you get some notion of how much mainstream world cinema and its relation to reality have been infantilized over the past half century.

My comments partially illustrate one of the points made in Guillory's essay: "The reduction of the text to the 'voice' of an author has been without question politically strategic in the short term, but at a certain long-term cost."[10] Although

Guillory isn't referring to cinema here, the downgrading of Italian neorealist films that couldn't readily be viewed as auteurist—a 60s phenomenon evident in both the U.S. and Europe—lamentably eclipsed the reputation of films such as *The Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D* (both memorably resurrected and appreciated in Martin Scorsese's recent video documentary, *My Voyage to Italy*). And two other points seem worth raising: the fact that *The Bicycle Thief* may indeed be a communist classic, as it was widely regarded in Europe at the time, and not simply a humanist landmark, as it was taken to be in 1949 America, is one good reason for *redefining* it as a classic. Similarly, a comparison of this film with a more recent Italian feature about a father and son, *Life Is Beautiful*, may point up virtues that might have been less apparent in previous decades.

The second section, "Special Problems," foregrounds some of the complications and practical difficulties that ensue once one decides that canon formation is a desirable activity in film criticism. Much of this—though by no means all of it—involves an interrogation of some of the ideological limitations of alleged classics, an approach that more specifically informs the fourth section, "Disputable Contenders," but figures here more generally as an inquiry into the critical methodologies that accompany canonizing. Nevertheless, "Special Problems" and "Disputable Contenders" are close enough in spirit to one another to qualify as siblings, much as "Classics" and "Filmmakers" are. At the same time, by focusing on filmmakers who are themselves cinephiles, critics, historians, and canonizers, the middle section, "Other Canons, Other Canonizers," proposes a more self-contained set of mirror structures. And "Filmmakers" more simply focuses on the salient characteristics of artists whom I believe are worth canonizing—comprising another reactionary set of examples of old-fashioned canonizing that allow the first and last sections to form bookends.

Assuming that this latter point needs clarifying, I'd like to point out that my use of the word "reactionary" here is mainly ironic because I don't think history can ever be repeated—either in film history or in the history of film reception and film appreciation. That's why I can only laugh when one of my colleagues remarks that none of the recent films can "duplicate" or "match" or "equal" or "approximate" the masterpieces or classics of the past, because my own definition of the singularity of a major film, tautologically speaking, is that it's singular.

I should stress that the process of canonization, which the pieces in this book explore in diverse ways, should not be equated with the "1,000 Favorites"—my personal and provisional list of pantheon movie picks—that I propose at the very end. The fact that in "Filmmakers" I explore the relationships among directing,

writing, and acting, in the essays on Samuel Fuller and Elaine May, and between the screenplays (filmed and unfilmed) and novels of Rudy Wurlitzer already begins to suggest some of the less obvious reasons why as well as how certain works deserve to be canonized. All three of these essays were originally written for a magazine published by the Screenwriters Guild, so the fact that I concentrate on writing in all three is unsurprising. What may strike some readers as more of a stretch—that some unpublished as well as some realized Wurlitzer scripts are worthy of canonizing, in part because of their relationship to his novels, and that Fuller as well as May should be valued as a writer-performer—only begins to suggest that the way we value certain works always depends on particular contexts. (The same applies to my piece on *I Am Cuba*, which seeks to complicate what we mean by "filmmaker" as well as by "canonical" films.)

In the book's coda I've made a stab at proposing a particular film canon of my own—that is to say, one that's prescriptive (and proscriptive) rather than descriptive, reflecting my own tastes and preferences—that can be regarded either as a possible (or ideal) viewing list or as a critical manifesto that can be debated. Recalling that "Pantheon Directors" was the highest plateau in Sarris's own canon, I offer my own list of "Pantheon Movie Picks"—which are, nonetheless, designed to be used in launching a new discussion, not in concluding an old one. And the terms "pantheon" and "picks" are intended to suggest a dialectic, pointing to two different kinds of critical modes, with the hopes that this book can help to build a bridge between them.

Jonathan Rosenbaum

DECEMBER 2002

NOTES

1. Review of Pauline Kael, "Raising *Kane*," *Film Comment* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1972); reprinted as "I Missed It at the Movies: Objections to 'Raising *Kane*,'" in *Perspectives on Citizen Kane*, ed. Ronald Gottesman (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), pp. 133–40.
2. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994).
3. Ibid., p. 548.
4. Ibid., p. 17.
5. For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see the exchanges between James Naremore and Adrian Martin, in "The Future of Academic Film Study," in *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia*, ed. Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin (London: British Film Institute, 2003).
6. Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares," reprinted in *I Lost It at the Movies* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), pp. 264–88. Significantly, Kael omitted this essay in her final collection of selected works, *For Keeps*.

7. For Wollen's revisions to the auteur theory, see Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, expanded ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 50–78.

8. See chapter 6 of *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See* (Chicago: a cappella, 2002), for a detailed critique of the AFI's first poll of this kind, on the one hundred greatest American films, as well as a proposed alternative list—my first major attempt at canonizing prior to the list I offer in this book.

9. John Guillory, "Canon, Syllabus, List: A Note on the Pedagogic Imaginary," reprinted in *The Best American Essays 1992*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), pp. 158–80. Originally published in 1991 in the journal *Transition*.

10. Ibid., p. 161.

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Fables of the Reconstruction

The Four-Hour *Greed*

There's surely no more famous lost film than Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*, a silent film made in 1923 and 1924 and released by MGM in mutilated form in late 1924. If you believe the hype of Turner Classic Movies, what's been lost has now been found—even though the studio burned the footage it cut almost seventy-five years ago, in order, according to Stroheim, to extract the few cents' worth of silver contained in the nitrate.

TCM's ad copy states, "In 1924, Erich von Stroheim created a cinematic masterpiece that few would see—until now." This is a lie, but one characteristic of an era that wants to believe that capitalism always has a happy ending, no matter how venal or stupid or shortsighted the capitalists happen to be. What TCM really means is that at 7:00 and 11:30 P.M. on Sunday, December 5, it will present a 239-minute version of *Greed*, which is ninety-nine minutes longer than the 1924 release. The ninety-nine minutes aren't filled with rediscovered footage. Instead the original release version has been combined with hundreds of rephotographed stills, sometimes with added pans and zooms, sometimes cropped, often with opening and closing irises. There's also a "continuity screenplay" dated March 31, 1923, a new score, and varying amounts of ingenuity. According to Rick Schmidlin, who produced this version on video, "This will be the single largest premiere of a silent film in the history of cinema." (The largest, that is, in terms of audience size, not screen size. And because it's on video, the prospects for theatrical showings are dim.)

I hasten to add that it's TCM's ad copy I'm objecting to, not Schmidlin's enterprise—which is a fascinating, instructive, and exciting undertaking, even if I have occasional bones to pick with it. In the interests of full disclosure, I should acknowledge that I was hired by Schmidlin as a consultant on another new version of a movie classic that was released last year by Universal Pictures, Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*. I was also asked by Schmidlin to be the consultant on this new version of *Greed*, an offer he made in part because of my short book about *Greed*, published in the BFI Film Classics series in 1993. (I declined, mainly because there was no compensation. My employment by Universal had seemed close enough to charity work; it was demoralizing to think of performing compar-

able services for the Turner empire for no fee at all, even if I supported what Rick was doing.)

One advantage to watching from the outside is that I can now appreciate the difficulty everyone else had in sizing up the reedited *Touch of Evil*. For all the major differences between the reconfigured *Touch of Evil* and the reconfigured *Greed*, neither qualifies as a "restoration" or a "director's cut," regardless of what Universal or Turner might say. Unfortunately, both new versions are based on documents that aren't publicly available in their entirety, which makes it difficult to evaluate the end product. The reconfigured *Touch of Evil* is based on a 58-page memo written in 1957 by Welles to the head of Universal, Edward Muhl, requesting editing and sound changes. Roughly two-thirds of this document became an appendix of the second edition of Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich's *This Is Orson Welles*, a book I edited for HarperCollins in the early 90s. But no one apart from Schmidlin, editor Walter Murch, myself, and a few others has seen the entire memo.[1]

The documents used to construct the new *Greed* include the aforementioned continuity screenplay and more than 650 stills, all of which Schmidlin came across in the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles when he started researching the film. None of these items is available to the general public. One can get another version of the script, edited by Joel Finler and published in London in 1972, and many stills have been published elsewhere, including the four hundred stills printed in a book assembled by the late Herman G. Weinberg, hyperbolically titled *The Complete Greed* (1973). Still, here too we have only a partial guide to what motivated Schmidlin's major decisions. This is hardly atypical. Similar gaps—and in most cases much bigger ones—exist in the documentation of the major artistic decisions made in virtually every movie. Nevertheless, most reviewers and many viewers proceed to make their judgments as if they knew all the essential data.

If you have any interest in *Greed*, you can't afford to miss this version, though if you miss it on TCM I suspect you'll eventually get a chance to see it on video. But I'm most interested here in discussing some of the gains and losses involved in such an enterprise, and in speculating about why projects of this kind are so popular nowadays. What do we want from such upgrades of familiar classics—and what do we get?

I'll start with the second question. In August we got a horrendous "realization" of Welles's unrealized screenplay *The Big Brass Ring* on cable. The rewrite was so extensive that it bore about the same relation to the original that *Sleepy Hollow* bears to Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"—in fact, it has even

less relation to the original. The Tim Burton movie trashes Irving's plot and characters, but at least it has more or less the same setting. This version of Welles's script radically changes the plot and characters *and* the settings: parts of Spain become Saint Louis, and Africa becomes Cuba. What's left is an embarrassment, even though the filmmakers think they're basking in Welles's reflected glory. Now we're supposed to be grooving on a typical TV movie, *RKO 281*, about the making of *Citizen Kane*; it's based on a poorly researched and intellectually dubious documentary feature comparing Welles with William Randolph Hearst (which was of course nominated for an Oscar). And we're supposed to be eagerly awaiting Tim Robbins's *The Cradle Will Rock*, a theatrical feature about Welles's production of a socialist opera that's also an ill-considered hatchet job, at least as far as Welles is concerned.

Plenty more Welles spin-offs have been announced. My favorite was heralded in the October 8 issue of *Variety*, in a story by Michael Fleming reporting plans

> to turn the Orson Welles film *The Magnificent Ambersons* into a four-hour miniseries that will shoot next summer in Ireland. The mini will be faithful to Welles's original script, something that could not be said of the original 1942 film. Welles turned in his cut and while he was on vacation, RKO cut nearly an hour and burned the original footage so Welles couldn't restore it.
>
> "We have considered a number of possibilities for *The Magnificent Ambersons*, but we liked this one because this will convey the power of the original script and is consistent with Orson's original vision," said RKO Pictures CEO/chairman Ted Hartley, who will be exec producer.

I love that phrase "while he was on vacation." So much for the months Welles spent organizing and directing *It's All True* in Latin America, portions of which are now in danger of being lost forever because no one's interested in raising money to preserve the footage. This was one of the many topics addressed at a four-day conference in Munich in late October on Welles's unfinished films, which I attended along with Welles scholars from eight countries and two of Welles's major collaborators, Oja Kodar and Gary Graver. There was also a lot of discussion about the restorations or completions of, among other films, *Don Quixote*, *The Other Side of the Wind*, *The Deep*, and *The Magic Show*; recent restorations of previously unseen television films made by Welles in the 50s and 60s were also shown and evaluated. The American press, film magazines included, showed no interest in this event, though it has shown a great deal of interest in all the bogus spin-offs—perhaps because only the spin-offs are capable of lining the pockets of American suits.[2] (Fleming also notes that RKO is considering a stage musical based on *Citizen Kane* and is developing an early unre-

alized Welles script, *The Way to Santiago*.) Over the years I've come to believe that any CEO or journalist who refers to Welles as "Orson" is automatically untrustworthy. Fleming's story about the new *The Magnificent Ambersons* is headlined "Orson's revenge"—reflecting some ludicrous fantasy that a four-hour miniseries based on the script of Welles's mutilated masterpiece should somehow garner his posthumous approval.

I don't mean to imply that Schmidlin's work on *Greed* belongs in the same category as the Welles rip-offs that are attracting such respectful attention from the media. In late October Schmidlin showed his version of *Greed* at the silent film festival in Pordenone, Italy—perhaps the most important annual event for film scholars, though it rarely makes waves in *Film Comment* (apart from an article about the new *Greed* in the current issue by Richard Koszarski, who also served as consultant on this version). But he can't prevent TCM and its publicists from headlining this event "Erich's revenge" if they want to, just as we who worked on the new version of *Touch of Evil* couldn't prevent Universal from mislabeling the old preview version on video "the director's cut" and a "restoration" only a month or so before our version premiered.

The big companies are so often unreliable when describing their products—and the press is so often reliable about rubber-stamping the companies' ad copy—that it's hard to decide how serious or frivolous these projects ultimately are. For sound advice, the public can't really count on sources such as the *New York Times*, which promoted the American Film Institute's first popularity poll with more fervor than it showed the reconfigured *Greed*. And the public shouldn't entirely trust TCM, even though it's a much more responsible organization than the AFI or the *Times* when it comes to film history.

It's worth speculating on some of the factors that make MGM's savage recutting of *Greed* such a legendary event. According to Stuart Klawans in his new book, *Film Follies: The Cinema Out of Order*, "The version released by MGM on December 4, 1924—to commercial disaster—has been sought out by relatively few people. The film envisioned by Stroheim can't be seen at all. *Greed* therefore exists primarily as an idea about filmmaking, which has passed among directors and writers, critics and moviegoers, for three-quarters of a century. A reputation for exhaustive veracity—whether to physical details or to the book—is a large part of this legend. With it comes another idea, which is even stranger considering Stroheim's efforts to efface himself from *Greed*. The film, or its legend, is central to the idea of Stroheim as an author."

Welles may be better known today than Stroheim, but Stroheim casts the more imposing shadow as a martyr at the hands of Hollywood studios (he also had more

chutzpah when it came to spending the studios' money). Both directors essentially got their way on the editing and release of their first features only, *Blind Husbands* and *Citizen Kane* (though Stroheim was so incensed by Universal's release title—his own title was *The Pinnacle*, which studio head Carl Laemmle nixed because it sounded too much like "pinochle"—that he took out an ad in a trade paper denouncing the studio for this change). But after Welles's ties with Hollywood became uncertain in the late 40s, he at least occasionally had low-budget European financing to turn to; Stroheim gave up directing after the debacle of his first sound picture, *Walking Down Broadway* (brutally edited and partially reshot by others), and worked only as an actor for the remaining twenty-four years of his life, mainly in Europe. Moreover, the destruction of his work went much further than it ever did with Welles's; of the 446 reels shot for *Greed*, yielding a rough cut lasting eight or nine hours, all but 140 minutes were destroyed by MGM. His second feature, *The Devil's Pass Key* (1920), hasn't survived at all; *Foolish Wives* (1921)—to my mind as great, complex, and accomplished as *Greed*—ran for six and a half hours in rough cut, and less than a third of it survives today. ("They are showing only the skeleton of my dead child," Stroheim announced at the time of the film's release.) Stroheim was fired as director of *Merry-Go-Round* (1923), after about six weeks of shooting. I'm not clear how much was cut from *The Merry Widow* (1925), but the second part of *The Wedding March* (1928), a full feature, was lost in a fire at the Cinémathèque Française. *Queen Kelly* (begun in 1928) was never finished because Stroheim was fired in the middle of shooting and never given a chance to edit his footage.

Given this unhappy record, it's a miracle Stroheim lasted as long as he did as a studio director. But he did because most of his released movies turned a profit. Whether any of his cuts of *Greed* would have been profitable is hard to say, but it's difficult to understand how Hollywood apologists can argue that Irving Thalberg was justified in eviscerating *Greed* for business reasons, given that the movie that was released made back less than half its budget.

As an act and as a statement, the movie clearly got under Thalberg's skin, and under the skin of the man who ran the studio, Louis B. Mayer. For *Greed* has to be the most negative depiction of what money can do to people that exists in movies (curiously, it has never been taken up as a cause by Marxist critics, at least not for ostensibly Marxist reasons). To summarize its plot in a couple of breathless sentences, the film tells the story of how two devoted best friends in San Francisco, Mac McTeague (Gibson Gowland) and Marcus Schouler (Jean Hersholt), and Marcus's cousin in Oakland, Trina Sieppe (ZaSu Pitts), who marries McTeague, wind up destroying one another after she wins $5,000 in a lottery. Trina gradually loses her mind, Mac loses his job as a dentist, both see most of their kindness and gentility progressively chipped away, and Marcus betrays both of them out of

envy. Their mutual destruction is an extended process, described with a great deal of delicacy as well as brutal directness, and part of the story's greatness—in Frank Norris's novel *McTeague* (1899) and in Stroheim's magisterial adaptation—is the degree to which it makes the deterioration of all three characters terrifyingly real and believable.

Some of the worst damage done when MGM reduced the original was to make this process seem at times forced and abrupt rather than a logical and organic development of these working-class characters, all of whom are treated as sympathetic as well as horrifying at various junctures. Marcus remains a relatively coarse figure throughout, but Mac and Trina, for all their limitations, are two of the most complex and multifaceted characters to be found anywhere in movies. This is arguably even more the case in Stroheim's movie than in Norris's novel, thanks to the remarkable performances of Gowland and Pitts, who succeed in incarnating these people so that they seem to exist between the shots and sequences as well as during them.

Schmidlin's four-hour version makes these two much more solid. The stills and additional dialogue expand their essences, and four other characters that make up two couples (three of whom are missing from MGM's original release) provide musical rhymes and stylistic and thematic contrasts that help define Mac and Trina. One of the couples is much more genteel: Old Grannis (Frank Hayes) and Miss Baker (Fanny Midgley) are shy, elderly neighbors of Mac and Marcus who live next door to each other in the same boardinghouse, each secretly nurturing romantic longings for the other, and who eventually get married. The images of their conjugal bliss are rendered in full color—one of the most startling and satisfying effects in the four-hour *Greed*, though, like every other glimpse we have of the two characters, it's conveyed only through stills. This poetic subplot—like the running motif of Mac's close kinship with birds, which becomes labored during a stretch of "significant" crosscutting when Mac's lovebirds are menaced by a cat—reeks of D. W. Griffith's influence. (Griffith gave Stroheim his first movie job, as an extra on *The Birth of a Nation*, and hired him again on *Intolerance*.)

The other couple is Maria Miranda Macapa (Dale Fuller), the mad Gypsy woman who sells Trina the winning lottery ticket, and Zerkow (Cesare Gravina), a grotesque junk dealer. Their grim relationship is driven by greed and mutual mistrust and lighted and framed mainly in an expressionist manner. After Maria fantasizes at length about a solid-gold service once owned by her parents in Central America, Zerkow becomes obsessed with the notion that she's hidden it somewhere, eventually slits her throat when she won't tell him its whereabouts, then drowns himself in the Bay.

Putting it broadly, Old Grannis and Miss Baker represent Mac and Trina's higher instincts, and Maria and Zerkow represent their baser impulses—a sym-

bolism that's underscored by Mac's living in the same boardinghouse as Old Grannis and Miss Baker when he's starting out as a dentist and his eventually moving with Trina into Zerkow's abandoned hovel after he loses his practice. Norris uses these supplementary characters and settings the way a painter might use colors, to enhance and echo his main subjects; Stroheim adheres to the same overall principles, yet through the powers of his imagination he makes even more out of them. Contrary to the absurd legend that Stroheim simply "filmed" Norris page by page, nearly a fifth of the plot in the script published by Lorrimer—recounting Mac's life prior to his arrival in San Francisco—transpires before he's found eating his Sunday dinner at the car conductors' coffee joint, the subject of the novel's opening sentence.

Given the mixture of visual styles—and the dabs of gold added to appropriate objects in Schmidlin's version, following indications in the continuity screenplay, and symbolic inserts of grotesquely long, bony hands fingering gold coins—it simply won't do to call *Greed* a triumph of realism, as many have. Clearly some of it is and some of it isn't. One thing that isn't realistic, for instance, is the movie's ambiguous and multilayered time frame. Stroheim updated Norris's plot, though not always consistently, from the end of the nineteenth century to 1908 and afterward, corresponding to the period of his own first years in America. As a result, sometimes the major characters are dressed in the clothes of the 1890s (fidelity to Norris), the extras in crowd scenes are dressed in the clothes of 1923 (fidelity to the present, when the film was shot), and the stated time of the action falls roughly in between these periods (fidelity to Stroheim's autobiographical impulses). Anticipating the jokey walk-ons of Alfred Hitchcock in his own pictures, Stroheim can be glimpsed in one of the stills as a balloon seller plying his trade on the street with Mac and Trina—a detail that can be interpreted as realism and as an in-joke at the same time.

On another level, *Greed* isn't merely a novelistic account of what happens to certain people but a history of the vicissitudes of certain objects—which becomes much clearer in the new, longer version. The progress and fate of Mac and Trina's wedding photograph—as an imposing object that hangs in their bedroom, as a lost and later found emblem of their love for each other, as an item bitterly thrown away with the trash, one torn half of which is used to make a wanted poster for Mac—becomes a condensed version of the entire story, one that recasts it in an even more disquieting light.

McTeague is surely a great novel, but one reason *Greed* is even better is that Stroheim had more lived experience to bring to the material. Norris, a millionaire's son and a gifted slummer, started writing *McTeague* in a creative-writing course at Harvard; the novel is dedicated to his teacher, and the first dental appointments Trina has with Mac are scheduled at the same time as

Norris's classes. Stroheim, the son of a Jewish merchant in Vienna, persuaded virtually everyone in Hollywood and western Europe—Orson Welles was a notable exception, at least by the 50s—that he had links to the Austrian aristocracy (a justification for the "von" in his name). The truth about his origins and the fact that he was a deserter from the Austrian army emerged only after his death, so he carried out his impersonation quite successfully from 1909, when he arrived in America at age twenty-four, until his death in Paris, in 1957. The formidable antihero played by Stroheim in *Foolish Wives* is also an impostor, and part of the fascination of Stroheim's filmography is its many brushes with autobiography. The poverty and physical abuse in *Greed*, for instance, can be traced back to Stroheim's early years in America and to his painful first marriage.

Part of what's objectionable about TCM's claims that the four-hour *Greed* allows us at long last to see Stroheim's "original" masterpiece is that it isn't clear which version they have in mind. Nobody seems to know what's meant by "the uncut *Greed*," because there are so many choices. The private screenings of the rough cut held by Stroheim in early 1924 were probably not all screenings of the same rough cut with the same length. One source mentions 47 reels (almost ten hours) that were later reduced to 42. Writer Harry Carr describes watching a 45-reel version from 10:30 A.M. to 8:30 P.M., and writer Idwal Jones mentions 42 reels lasting from 10:00 to 7:00. Someone else recounts seeing an eight-hour version. Considering all the things that can transpire at screenings—projector breakdowns, pauses between reels, breaks for meals—all these accounts might refer to the same rough cut, but that seems highly unlikely. The next version edited by Stroheim—22 reels according to MGM, but either 26 or 28 according to Grant Whytock, who was then asked by Stroheim to edit a still shorter version—must have been longer than four hours as well. Whytock's version ran to either 15 or 18 reels—nobody seems to agree about the lengths of any of the successive versions, maybe because they were all in constant flux—and was designed to be shown over two evenings; the subplot involving Zerkow was eliminated from this cut, but the subplot involving Old Grannis and Miss Baker was apparently retained. All these versions were thrown out for the sake of the ten-reel version eventually released by MGM. At the time of this release the *New York Times*—as dedicated to the art of film in 1924 as it is today—actually praised MGM for reducing the film to ten reels, though the reviewer hadn't seen any of the earlier cuts.

Working on the reconfigured *Touch of Evil*, I discovered that one couldn't delete or alter any single shot without affecting everything else, sometimes in subtle and

mysterious ways. The same thing has to be true of *Greed*, and one of the most pronounced pleasures I had in watching Schmidlin's version was seeing much of the older footage as if for the first time. Again and again I found myself asking of a particular scene, "Did I really see this before?" In every case I had—there's no new footage apart from the stills and additional dialogue in intertitles—but the extra dialogue often has the effect of giving the old footage a fresh appearance.

I prefer to regard this four-hour *Greed* as a study version, an indication of what some of the longer versions of the film must have been like—since it clearly isn't a replica of any of those versions. Even with more than 650 stills, the material available as possible additions was limited, and it appears that in most cases Schmidlin opted for clarifying the main story because that's what the stills allowed him to do. For instance, the iris out on the train carrying away the Sieppe family near the end of part 1, after the wedding of their daughter to Mac—an image that reminds me of the beautiful iris closing out a section midway through *The Magnificent Ambersons*—doesn't appear in this version. Is this because no still of that shot was available, or because the continuity script eliminated that shot, or for some other reason? I have no way of knowing, but the first reason seems the likeliest. (Also, early on, Schmidlin had to wrestle with how to repeat sections of the recent score by Carl Davis to fill what was then a three-hour running time; happily he was able to negotiate an extra hour and a new score, by Robert Israel, which, however uneven, is a vast improvement.)

With some entire dramatic scenes reduced to a few stills, you can't indicate what a six- or eight-hour movie might have been like. I especially regret the nearly complete absence here of a long early sequence covering about thirty pages in the Lorrimer script that recounts what most of the major characters do on a "typical" Saturday—the day that precedes the novel's opening—before most of them have met one another and before we're sure what most of them have to do with the main story. This almost nonnarrative stretch, which would undoubtedly still seem radical today—like an endless series of digressions—foregrounds Stroheim's manner of accumulating details into a solid, forceful mass while suspending storytelling in the usual sense. I'm fairly convinced that Harry Carr must have had this sequence in mind when he compared the 45-reel version of *Greed* to *Les misérables* and wrote, "Episodes come along that you think have no bearing on the story, then 12 or 14 reels later, it hits you with a crash."

So this version of *Greed* isn't everything—nor could or should it be. *Greed* will always be unfinished and incomplete, just as Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* will be. Contrary to rumor and propaganda, capitalism doesn't always have a happy ending. But Schmidlin's work can allow us to use our imaginations to construct what might have been, an inconclusive activity and, for precisely that reason, an exciting prospect—because it requires our creativity and not simply our

desire to take in a great movie and then be done with it. A perpetually unfinished masterpiece throws the ball into our court, which is precisely where it belongs.

—*Chicago Reader*, November 26, 1999

NOTES

1. The full memo was subsequently made available on the DVD of *Touch of Evil* and on line at www.wellesnet.com/touch_memo1.htm, but has yet to appear in print. [2002]

2. Ultimately (if unsurprisingly) the TV remake of *Ambersons* proved to be even further removed from Welles's script than the original release version. But this didn't prevent it from receiving an enormous amount of press—unlike, say, *Around the World with Orson Welles* and *The Dominici Affair*, comprising an ambitious 1955 TV series directed by Welles but never aired in the United States, which were released on separate DVDs around the same time and got virtually no press at all. [2002]

Fascinating Rhythms

M

It's unthinkable that a better movie will come along this year [1997] than Fritz Lang's breathtaking *M* (1931), his first sound picture, showing this week in a beautifully, if only partially, restored version at the Music Box. (The original was 117 minutes, and this one is 105—though until the invaluable restoration work of the Munich Film Archives, most of the available versions were only 98 minutes.) Shot in only six weeks, it's the best of all serial-killer movies—a dubious thriller subgenre after Lang and three of his disciples, Jacques Tourneur (*The Leopard Man*, 1943), Alfred Hitchcock (*Psycho*, 1960), and Michael Powell (*Peeping Tom*, 1960), abandoned it. *M* is also a masterpiece structured with the kind of perfection that calls to mind both poetry and architecture and that makes even his disciples' classics seem minor by comparison. *M* came at a privileged juncture in history—the period when silent movies were giving way to talkies, dividing the art of cinema into two distinct kinds of narrative flow: the flow of images, intertitles, and music that achieved a kind of apotheosis in the late 20s and early 30s in pictures such as Dovzhenko's *Earth*, Lang's *Spione*, Murnau's *Sunrise*, Vidor's *The Crowd*, Chaplin's *City Lights*, Sternberg's *The Docks of New York*, and Stroheim's unfinished *Queen Kelly*; and the flow of dialogue, narration, music, and sound effects that carried images along like uprooted trees and houses in a flood. Like only a few other pictures in this exciting transitional period—Dreyer's *Vampyr*, Ozu's *The Only Son*, Sternberg's *Thunderbolt* and *The Blue Angel*, and Dovzhenko's *Ivan* are the first that come to mind—*M* draws mightily on both of these powerful strains, picking and choosing from the best of both. Building its story on visual rhymes that are carried by dialogue that periodically turns into offscreen narration, and fusing the two great traditions of silent film—montage/editing and camera movement / mise en scène—this astonishing movie represents an unsurpassed grand synthesis of storytelling.

Lang himself correctly maintained to the end of his life that *M* was his best film—not so much for its formal beauty as for the social analysis that its form articulates. (In Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 *Contempt*—another restoration that will open at the Music Box a month from now, in which Fritz Lang plays himself—this point is underlined when he first meets Brigitte Bardot's character, who expresses enthusiasm for his western *Rancho Notorious*; Lang graciously replies,

"I prefer *M*.") He also, according to film historian and programmer David Overbey (who knew him during his last years), tended to change the subject or grouse whenever the name Orson Welles came up. It's an understandable reaction; in spite of all the pages wasted on the alleged influence of *Stagecoach* or *The Power and the Glory* on *Citizen Kane*, *M* is clearly—visibly and audibly—the major predecessor of that movie's low and high angles, its baroque and shadowy compositions, its supple and wide-ranging camera movements, its tricky sound and dialogue transitions, and above all its special rhythmic capacity to tell a "detective story" by turning most of its characters into members of a chorus, delineating a social milieu and penetrating a dark mystery at the same time. (Welles claimed never to have seen any of Lang's German work when he started making movies, and many of his stylistic moves surely emerged from his theater and radio work. But it would be difficult to look at *Citizen Kane* again without thinking of *M* repeatedly.)

I'm still inching my way through Patrick McGilligan's recently published, 548-page *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, but it's already apparent that this first posthumous biography of Lang follows pretty much the same kitchen-sink principle as Frank Brady's *Citizen Welles*: it's both spotty as scholarship and invaluable as a treasury of sources and suppositions. McGilligan doesn't know German and is often sloppy when it comes to making attributions, but he has the merit of being candid about his uncertainties—most of them compounded by Lang's lifelong talent for embroidery and mythmaking. So this isn't a work of solipsistic indulgence or spiteful invention, like David Thomson's recent execrable Welles biography, *Rosebud*, and it's a better read than Todd McCarthy's *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood*, because the career it describes is a good deal more shrouded in mysteries and ambiguities.

The standard story about Lang's flight from Germany in 1933, repeatedly told by Lang from 1942 on, is that shortly after the Nazi banning of his second talkie, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, he was summoned to the office of master Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, who offered him the job of running the Nazi film industry. Keeping his eye on the clock and hoping to make it to his bank in time, Lang conspired to leave the country for good the same day. But a few years ago Lang's passport came to light, revealing that he made many subsequent trips back to Germany over the next three months, and no mention is made in Goebbels's detailed diaries of this alleged meeting or offer.

We'll probably never know the full story, but the important facts are that Lang was central to the German film industry before and during the Nazis' rise to power and that he did flee from Germany in 1933, leaving behind his estranged

and pro-Nazi wife, Thea von Harbou—the principal writer of all his films in the 20s and 30s, including *M*. And the complex analysis of urban German society offered in *M*, clearly influenced by Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, offers a fascinating look at that society and what it was becoming. ("Organization" is a key word here; it's also where the film's resemblance to architecture comes in.)

As a city is terrorized by the crimes of a deranged murderer of little girls, not only the police but other criminals and even beggars, threatened by the panic that puts everyone under suspicion, decide they have to help track the culprit down to protect their own interests. Lang steadily crosscuts between the efforts of these three separate factions (and odd mix of allies), the public at large, and the murderer himself (Peter Lorre), graphically describing each stage of the pursuit and at the same time exposing the inner life of the city. Arguably, no other thriller has so effectively combined exposition and suspense with a portrait of an entire society, and *M* does this through a dazzling system of visual rhymes and aural continuities, spatial leaps and thematic repetitions, that virtually reinvents the art of movie storytelling.

In keeping with the collectivist spirit of the early 30s, social organization and narrative organization work hand in hand here; they even become indistinguishable insofar as organizing a manhunt is what the city and the story both do. In an early sequence a taunting letter from the murderer to a city newspaper is published, and we move straight from the letter in the paper to a state minister (Franz Stein) reading it while arguing over the phone with the chief of police (Ernst Stahl-Nachbaur), who's seen in separate shots. As the police chief describes his department's investigation, his voice turns into narration over a striking montage illustrating his various points. One of these points takes us to police headquarters, where a detective is questioning two irate, competing witnesses—each a vivid character sketch—about whether the bonnet worn by a potential murder victim that morning was red or green; a crisply edited comic interlude concludes with one witness snapping, "Of course, inspector, if you're willing to listen to a socialist . . ."—one of many details missing from most previous versions of *M*.

Another of the chief's points refers to the police archives, and after the film cuts to an official in the archives dictating a report about the criminal mind to a secretary, this dictation picks up the chief's narration, which we then hear over a shot of the murderer himself in his apartment—making faces and contorting his features in front of a mirror, as if playfully trying on the stereotypes that the report is proposing about him. Watching the murderer, it's easy to assume that he's responding to the voice of a radio announcer, but this may be because the movie's ingenious system of turning dialogue into narration (and sometimes vice versa) carries one along so quickly that one sometimes participates in the storytelling process by inventing details of one's own.

One might say that Lang is positing the collective voice of the city as his storyteller as well as his subject—a collective social voice that's juxtaposed with the lone voice of the murderer, tonelessly whistling a theme from Edvard Grieg's *Peer Gynt* as his eerie signature. (Because Lorre was unable to whistle, it was Lang himself who whistled—anticipating the close-ups of his own hand in many subsequent features when close-ups of hands were needed.) Although the social sense that makes all this collective consciousness possible seems far removed from our own era, every link in the collective chain is strikingly individualized: none of the mobs in this film is faceless. Furthermore, the film's patterns of rhyme and continuity set up an implicit process of analysis in which good and evil, innocence and corruption, intelligence and stupidity, all become relative values within the same complex tapestry.

We might assume that the murderer, the only person operating exclusively as an individual, is pure evil and that his pursuers—police, criminals, beggars, panicky street pedestrians—are all relatively innocent. And Lang allows us to sustain this bias for most of the picture, working on our sense of dread about the barely known killer, but raising a few doubts along the way. For instance, various clusters of people on the street suggest potential lynch mobs when they settle on innocent bystanders as suspicious; and the murderer himself—a childlike gnome called Hans Beckert—is revealed to us so gradually that we aren't able to perceive him as a fully defined individual until the end. But by the time all the separate factions, including the murderer, are climactically brought together, we identify with Beckert in spite of ourselves, recoiling, as he does, from the angry mob that confronts him. Thanks to Lorre's volcanic performance, this is one of the most terrifying and emotionally wrenching extended sequences ever filmed, and the moral, ethical, and social questions it poses are virtually identical to the arguments we hear today about serial killers and what we should do with them.

Part of the awesome effect of this sequence derives from the fact that it's the only truly extended sequence in the film, as well as the only one that depends entirely on spatial and temporal continuity. Until this point the film leaps back and forth across the city, from one smoke-filled room or crowded or empty street scene to another—showing how similar cops and crooks can be while planning their strategies or charting their separate interactions with the beggars, the community, or each other. The oratorical hand gesture begun by Schranker (Gustaf Grundgens), head of the underworld, at one strategy meeting where he says, "I'm appealing to you . . ." is completed by the police chief at another strategy meeting, where he says, "for advice." The point of making this continuity cut isn't to imply that the crooks and cops are identical, but to point out that they're similar in

certain respects, even to the point of having common interests. It's an analysis that brilliantly serves triple duty by traversing the city and advancing the plot at the same time.

At times the camera movements are just as purposeful in serving these multiple ends. Our introduction to the Beggars' Market occurs during the same sequence, after we've passed back and forth between Inspector Lohmann (the charismatic Otto Wenicke) at the police meeting and Schranker at the crooks' hideout. When Schranker argues the need for enlisting spies who can root out the killer undetected (he and his cohorts are portrayed as shadows on a wall), he finally settles on "Beggars. The beggars' union." Before we can puzzle out what sort of organized labor he's talking about, a brilliant long take answers the question in detail: the camera leads us from an array of collected cigar and cigarette butts arranged by beggars on a table (a detail missing from earlier prints) to a notice reading "No More Credit" to another table bearing scavenged pieces of bread and sausage to a close-up of beggars handling these items. Then comes a pan to a card game that eventually proceeds into another room—where we find a food counter and a blackboard listing the prices and ingredients of various sandwiches—and continues up to and through the window of a second-story office. (This inventory, I should add, omits many incidental and anecdotal details.) Not only is our question answered by this shot, but the rudiments of an entire organization and a way of life are unraveled in the process. At the end of the shot Schranker appears in the upstairs office to recruit beggars, which picks up the narrative again.

If Lang has a visual signature that can be followed throughout his career, it might be the analytical overhead shot—the high camera angle that postulates individuals as pieces in some sort of pitiless board game. *M* periodically uses that signature, the camera most often poised over the streets of the city at night—creating images that spell out the basics of noir long before anyone dreamed up that generic term. This signature is always part of an overall pattern, part of a game in which several players are involved. Yet the film's climactic sequence occurs in a dark basement, and basements, subterranean caves, and dungeons are every bit as operative in Lang's vision as his overhead shots, defining the limits of his universe. The remainder of his movies are more commonplace, generally concerning everyday life as it's ordinarily lived between those boundaries.

It's easy, I suppose, to feel nostalgic about a time when an artist could dare to examine and embrace the entire life of a grand metropolis, from top to bottom, physically as well as psychologically. What I think I love most in *M*, emanating directly from the brilliance of its form, is its faith and confidence in the possibility

of such an enterprise—speculating in the process on the havoc that one individual can wreak on an organism such as a city, then on the emotional havoc that organism can wreak on the individual. It assumes a kind of naïve faith in the world we live in as something that can be seen, heard, and ultimately grasped, at least up to a point. Beyond that point is merely terror—a metaphysical terror connected to the vastness of the unknown, perceived as the daunting enormity of overhead and underground spaces—something that *M* also acknowledges and exploits to the utmost.

In a universe ruled by video and cyberspace, where such assumptions can no longer be entertained or even easily imagined, the terror remains, but not the mission to see the world whole. (Lang took a halfhearted stab at this in his last film, *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*, which involves former Nazis and video surveillance and was made back in Germany in 1960—but hardly anyone was interested at the time.) Maybe we'll have real stories like *M* again, and better ways of telling them, once we've rediscovered more precisely what it is that we're missing.

—*Chicago Reader*, August 8, 1997

The Color of Paradise

Jour de fête

> Every Tati film marks simultaneously (a) a moment in the work of Jacques Tati; (b) a moment in the history of French society and French cinema; (c) a moment in film history. Since 1948, the six films that he has realized are those that have scanned our history the best. Tati isn't just a rare filmmaker, the author of few films (all of them good), he's a living point of reference. We all belong to a period of Tati's cinema: the author of these lines belongs to the one that stretches from *Mon oncle* (1958: the year before the New Wave) to *Playtime* (1967: the year before the events of May '68). There is hardly anyone else but Chaplin who, since the sound period, has had this privilege, this supreme authority: to be present even when he isn't filming, and, when he's filming, to be precisely up to the moment—that is, just a little bit in advance. Tati: a witness first and last. —Serge Daney, *La rampe* (my translation)

> The justification for [a] pretense to disengagement derives from our Victorian habit of marginalizing the experience of art, of treating it as if it were somehow "special"—and, lately, as if it were somehow curable. This is a preposterous assumption to make in a culture that is irrevocably saturated with pictures and music, in which every elevator serves as a combination picture gallery and concert hall. The question of whether we can enjoy, or even decipher, the world we see without the experience of images, or the world we hear without the experience of music, seems to me pretty much a no-brainer. In fact, I cannot imagine a reason for categorizing any part of our involuntary, ordinary experience as "unaesthetic," or for imagining that this quotidian aesthetic experience occludes any "real" or "natural" relationship between ourselves and the world that surrounds us. All we do by ignoring the live effects of art is suppress the fact that these experiences, in one way or another, inform our every waking hour.
>
> —Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*

> The cinema does not show, it previsions . . . when it is artisanal, it is ten or twenty years in advance; when it is factory-made, it is two or three years. —Jean-Luc Godard

In 1942 Jacques Tati was living in occupied France. The grandson of a Dutch picture framer whose clients included Toulouse-Lautrec and van Gogh, the thirty-four-year-old Tati had played rugby, performed in music halls, and acted in

a few short comic films. That year he left Paris with a screenwriter friend named Henri Marquet in search of the remotest part of the country they could find, hoping to escape recruitment as workers in Germany. They finally settled on a farm near Sainte-Sévère-sur-Indre, located in the dead center of France—not far from where George Sand had entertained such houseguests as Chopin, Liszt, Flaubert, and Turgenev—and spent a year or so getting acquainted with the village and its inhabitants.

Three years after Germany's surrender, Tati and Marquet returned to the village to make a short film, *L'école des facteurs* ("The School for Postmen"), in which Tati played François, the village postman, who delivers the mail on a bicycle. (François was based loosely on a bit character played by someone else in a comic short Tati had acted in ten years earlier.) *L'école des facteurs* was Tati's first directing project, and the following year he and Marquet returned with different cinematographers but the same basic crew to rework and expand the short into a feature, *Jour de fête*, whose brand-new color process, Thomson-Color, would make it the first French feature in color.

Thomson-Color was a complex experimental process, conceived as an artisanal invention, a homemade alternative to big-studio technology, that could become France's answer to Technicolor. Aware that he was taking a calculated risk, Tati employed two cameras—one using color and the other, for safety, using black and white—but meanwhile he designed the film's settings with color in mind, painting many of the house doors in the village a dark gray and dressing most of the villagers in dark coats. The basic idea—part of which he carried over to *Playtime* almost twenty years later—was to show a colorless village springing to life once holiday caravans arrive with carnival trappings such as painted merry-go-round horses and shiny banners, then returning to drabness once all the festive regalia is carted away.

But Thomson-Color didn't work, and after Tati found himself unable to print the film in color he resigned himself to releasing it in black and white. He was unable to find a distributor for well over a year, until a successful preview in a Paris suburb inspired him to make a few more revisions, but when the film finally opened in 1949 it grossed ten times its cost and won major prizes in Venice and Cannes, launching Tati's international reputation. (His next two features, *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* and *Mon oncle*, were even bigger hits—the latter won him an Oscar—and only after Tati sank all his fortune into *Playtime*, one of the most expensive French films ever made, did he become commercially problematic again. He never fully recovered from the stigma professionally, even after his final two features, *Traffic* and *Parade*.)

By the 50s Tati was riding high, critically as well as commercially. Shortly before the release of *Mon oncle* Jean-Luc Godard wrote, "With him, French

neorealism was born. *Jour de fête* resembled *Open City* in inspiration." But Tati's original conception of *Jour de fête* never fully left him. In 1964 he reedited the film, remixed the sound track, and colored a few stray visual details with stencils. He even went back to Sainte-Sévère-sur-Indre to shoot new material involving an added character, a young painter who could be seen sketching some of the Bastille Day activities, and Tati was so adept at integrating this new material that the result was seamless. For the next thirty-odd years, this was the *Jour de fête* that everyone saw. Tati extended this talent for revision to some of his other features: over twenty years after *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* was first released in 1953 he deftly inserted a brief gag alluding to *Jaws*, and long after *Traffic* opened in 1971 he casually slipped in a comic afterthought involving filling-station giveaways.

How an additional character could compensate for the absence of a full-color image is an intriguing puzzle. But Tati's compositional strategy was an intrinsic part of his genius, making him a worthy grandson of van Gogh's framer; he was an instinctive artist with an uncanny sense of how seemingly unconnected aspects of a film could connect with one another. (Interestingly enough, this sense corresponds to Carl Dreyer's stated reason for using four rhyming intertitles in his last feature, *Gertrud*, intertitles that were later removed. Dreyer had hoped to shoot that film in color and told an interviewer that had he succeeded, those four intertitles—none of which made any reference to color—would have been unnecessary.)

Part of Tati's legacy is his radical rethinking of how sound relates to image—an idea his peer and contemporary Robert Bresson formulated in different terms. But Tati's view of color was more than a means of fine-tuning his images; it was part of a wider and more interactive scheme. Because he shot all his films silently and constructed his sound tracks afterward, Tati was able to create an interplay between image and sound that was never a matter of one simply reinforcing the other, and he used color more to accent the image than to enhance it. The Hollywood factory notion of applying sheets or slabs of color—which reaches a kind of apotheosis in colorizing black-and-white features—lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from Tati's artisanal methods, in which little dabs and touches are applied as discreet counterbalances in the overall composition.

Sophie Tatischeff, Tati's second child and only daughter and a professional film editor who was born during the shooting of *Jour de fête*, must have shared this view of her father's approach when she returned to the color negative of *Jour de fête* five years after his death, hoping with the help of cameraman François Ede to reconstruct a color print. Her understanding of her father's conception of color also helps to explain why, once she and Ede finally overcame the technical problems seven years later, she decided to delete the character of the painter and aim instead for a restoration of her father's original vision.

The full story of this restoration is recounted in a book Ede published in France three years ago, a week before the successful French release of the film in color. I haven't been able to read the book, but judging from various other accounts of the patience and technical wizardry involved, it's a story of artisanal pride and determination triumphing over impossible odds. In some ways it recalls *Jour de fête* itself, which chronicles the bumbling efforts of a village postman to approximate the streamlined technology and speed of the American postal service after glimpsing a hyperbolic French newsreel on the subject. (A bent old lady with a goat who serves as the village's spokesperson and guides us through some of its inner workings—a bit like the stage manager in *Our Town*—eventually concludes that François is better off doing what he's always done than trying to top the Americans, cautionary words that reflect ironically on Tati's misadventures with Thomson-Color.)

One might argue that Tatischeff and Ede's work isn't a "pure" restoration insofar as Tati himself was never able to edit his own color footage. But Tatischeff, who worked with her father on the editing of half of his features, was probably more qualified to carry out this task than anyone else alive, and she had two previous versions of *Jour de fête* edited by her father to guide her decisions. What emerges is not so much a "new" Tati film as an old one seen properly for the first time, in the full flavor of its own period.

None of this would matter quite as much, of course, if *Jour de fête* weren't already a masterpiece by one of the key figures in the history of cinema. The film has always been a charming populist favorite—at least when people could discover films on their own, without expensive ad campaigns to limit their choices. But its restored color version is doubly precious: this is color that truly looks like 1947—not films of that period so much as 1947 itself—and its bucolic postwar euphoria, not to mention its affection for interactive village life, has all the fragrant perfume of a time capsule. (For comparably paradisiacal views of village life mixed with dollops of wry social criticism, I can only think of a few John Ford items, like *Judge Priest*, *The Sun Shines Bright*, and *The Quiet Man*.) Thomson-Color looks distinctly different from every other color process, and the fact that we have virtually no other color record of French life during the 40s gives *Jour de fête* the force of a revelation.

Formally, *Jour de fête* offers a rough sketch of most of the ideas Tati would flesh out in his later features (reaching their climaxes in the black-and-white *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* and the color *Playtime*). There's the comic interplay between foreground and background details, such as our first introduction to François the postman on

his bike, dodging an invisible bee in the background while a hay mower in the foreground tries to decode his curious zigzagging movements—until the same bee menaces the mower a moment later. There's the clean detachment of the images from the sound track—the latter a beautiful and highly selective blend of sound effects, ambient noises, and dialogue, comprising a kind of *musique concrète* (though there's more dialogue than Tati would ever use again). This separation of sound from image allows for a certain counterpoint between the two, most apparent in the hilarious pantomime of flirtation between carnival worker Roger (Guy Decomble) and villager Jeannette (Maine Vallée) to the accompaniment of dialogue from an American western playing inside an adjacent tent. (This flirtation recurs in various forms throughout the picture, and the fact that Roger is married gives the romantic longings a certain naughtiness that Tati would omit from his later movies; in more ways than one, this is his most typically French film.) *Jour de fête* amounts to a kind of stylistic manifesto as well. Most of Tati's work derives from observation rather than pure invention, inflected by the aesthetic and poetic properties of music, painting, and dance (which is where the invention comes in); everyday details are the basic unit of this enterprise rather than incidents designed to advance a plot. This is why Tati's films are generally better appreciated by ordinary viewers than by critics and specialists, who tend to be more rigid about what films should be, storywise and otherwise. (Twenty years ago, my film class students were far more responsive to *Playtime* than were critics like Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris, who declared themselves bored and alienated.) Tati's observation is tempered and structured by an aesthetic-poetic imagination and by the perception that all of us, as critic Dave Hickey suggests, are living continuously inside a complex work of art that we call the world, and that perhaps only another work of art can teach us to appreciate what's right in front of us.

Thematically as well, *Jour de fête* offers a kind of blueprint to Tati's subsequent oeuvre, despite the fact that it offers the only rural setting in his work apart from the middle section of *Traffic*. The enormous impact of the French newsreel about American postal delivery—not only on François but also on the other villagers, who mercilessly mock François's relative inefficiency—initiates a complex and ambivalent critique of technology in general and Americanization in particular that informs the remainder of Tati's work, apparent even in the bilingual titles of his last three films. (Ironically, the implied critique of French versus American mail delivery—however applicable to a sleepy village in the late 40s—was directly contradicted by my own experience living in Paris in the early 70s, when I could practically set my watch by the three prompt deliveries made to my building every weekday and the two made every Saturday.) The combined threat and promise of

the "new," inextricably tied up with an internal debate about America, is discernible in the tacky suburban architecture (complete with Japanese garden) in *Mon oncle*, the invading American tourists in *Playtime*, and the all-purpose camper-trailer in *Traffic*. And *Jour de fête* remains not just "a little bit" ahead of its time (according to Serge Daney) or "ten or twenty years" (according to Godard's formula) but a full half century in its perception of what mass culture and technology mean to the quiet life of a remote village. As American and Japanese investors circle mainland China, *Jour de fête* might serve as a relevant commentary on the day after tomorrow.

To appreciate Tati's ambivalence about this matter in all its complexity, one has to see *Jour de fête* in a specifically postwar context, where genuine gratitude toward Americans for helping to liberate France weighed against the cultural and economic bullying imposed by the Marshall Plan—which included a quota of Hollywood pictures, some of them in Technicolor. (Late in the film, a cycling François manages to run two American MPs off a country road by pretending to bark orders over a telephone, in a parody of American-style efficiency.)

Most of the preceding fails to do justice to the physical comedy in *Jour de fête*, which harks back to the purity of silent comedy in its grace and the beauty of its natural surroundings. (There's even a cross-eyed carnival worker who seems inspired by Ben Turpin, and the bucolic splendor of the countryside offsets François's frantic pedaling as he makes his rounds.) It's a perfect movie for children—some of whom catch certain details that adults are prone to miss—and seeing it on a big screen can be as enveloping and as transporting an experience as many of the better Disney animated features.

Yet judging by the total indifference of the American mainstream toward the restored *Jour de fête*—a lack of interest dictated by the film's U.S. distributor, Miramax, which has brought the film to America only reluctantly, without ads, and for no longer than a week at only a handful of locations—it is much more culturally serious these days to spit on the grave of Henry James with a slimy soft-core travelogue like *The Wings of the Dove*. Because of the money and muscle Miramax has expended on this cheesy factory product, it hasn't had any trouble gaining the recognition and (in most cases) reverence of *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *New York*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, the TV reviewers, and numerous other media players, none of which has shown a flicker of interest in the color *Jour de fête*.

It's an axiom of our Reaganite culture that businesses can do whatever they want with movies and that the press should rubber-stamp these decisions on the basis of ad budgets. Miramax is of course perfectly entitled to deem this crowd

pleaser unmarketable and unworthy of anybody's attention—though luckily this also means that they haven't bothered to recut it, which they generally do only with films that they "believe in." What I object to, rather, is the mass media's implied insult to the audience at large by kowtowing to Miramax and refusing to acknowledge any alternatives that could possibly merit anyone's attention, even when they're as irreplaceable as the restored *Jour de fête*. In a society where price tags have become the only cultural credentials, Tati's film couldn't even pass muster at a garage sale. But for this week only, at the Music Box, you can still inhabit a world where artisans shine.

—*Chicago Reader*, January 16, 1998

Backyard Ethics

Hitchcock's *Rear Window*

Alfred Hitchcock's greatest movie, *Rear Window*, is as fresh as it was when it came out—in part, paradoxically, because of how profoundly it belongs to its own period. It's set in Greenwich Village during a sweltering summer of open windows, and it reeks of 1954. (Robert A. Harris's restored version is so beautiful and precise it almost makes up for his botch of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* a few years back.)

Peter Bogdanovich notes in *Who the Devil Made It* that Hitchcock "didn't use a score" in the movie, "only source music and local sounds," which isn't exactly true. In fact, we get quite traditional theme music from Franz Waxman behind the opening credits, and, more important, the film subtly integrates hit tunes of the mid-50s into the ambient sound track, most noticeably "Mona Lisa" and "That's Amore," which had been introduced the previous year by Dean Martin in another Paramount picture, *The Caddy*. The only serious flaw in *Rear Window* is the hokey use of a song to resolve a couple of subplots—which audiences in 1954 didn't find convincing either.

When this romantic comedy-thriller was made, TV hadn't yet posed a serious threat to radio, much less to movies, and there's nary a TV set or TV screen in sight. The movie's overall narrative form of scanning past windows in a courtyard seems to anticipate channel surfing, but it also reflects the way one turns a radio knob, tuning in and out of frequencies while the station indicator moves horizontally or vertically along the dial. The same pattern is apparent in the beautifully calibrated camera movements as well as the brilliantly mixed and nuanced sound recording.

Turning a radio knob is actually the first decisive act by anyone in *Rear Window*. The camera briefly scans the courtyard that will remain the movie's only location, showing the hero—L. B. Jefferies (James Stewart), better known as Jeff—fast asleep in the 92-degree morning heat. Then we see a composer (Ross Bagdasarian) across the way shaving, sufficiently irritated by a radio commercial ("Men, are you over forty? When you wake up in the morning, do you feel tired and run-down? Do you have that listless feeling?") to switch stations to a rumba. The sound of an alarm clock shifts the focus to a middle-aged couple a few apartments away waking up on their fire escape, where they've bedded down

to beat the heat. (In 1954 air conditioners were of course about as common as TV sets.)

Then the camera dips down and to the left to show a curvy ballet dancer (Georgine Darcy) doing exercises while getting dressed—a musical-comedy heroine and va-va-voom 50s sex object, subsequently labeled "Miss Torso" by Jeff—before returning to Jeff and panning down to his left leg, which is in a plaster cast. It then crosses the room to show us succinctly who he is and how he broke his leg: we see a broken camera in front of a photograph of a racing-car accident, followed by other framed news photos, a negative close-up of a female model, and stacks of the *Life*-like magazine Jeff works for, with a positive image of the model's photo on the cover.

This introduction to Jeff reminds us of Hitchcock's roots in silent cinema, but the highly developed sense of being current never falters. Some of this impression undoubtedly comes from the bantering dialogue of screenwriter John Michael Hayes, adapting a Cornell Woolrich story about an invalid so that it features more glamorous characters; Jeff's girlfriend, Lisa (Grace Kelly), a chic, wealthy fashion buyer and former model, was apparently based in part on Hayes's own fashion-model wife. Hayes was a radio writer with a flair for romantic comedy, at least in his first three scripts for Hitchcock—*Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, and the underrated and uncharacteristically utopian *The Trouble with Harry*—and he had a light touch that was never matched by Hitchcock's subsequent screenwriters, with the exception of Ernest Lehman, who scripted *North by Northwest* and *Family Plot*. The high-gloss sophistication and wit extends to the treatment of sex in the movie, which is a lot more daring than most other Hollywood films of the period. When Lisa announces to Jeff that she's staying overnight and then proceeds to model her tiny overnight bag and the negligee inside it—both items occasion a few uneasy leers from Jeff's detective chum Tom (Wendell Corey)—one suspects the censors were placated only because Jeff's plaster cast made sex between him and Lisa seem unlikely. It's interesting that Hayes's original script intimated that Lisa was somewhat frigid and that Jeff was frustrated about not having had sex with her—two hints Hitchcock presumably got Hayes to eliminate. (This production information, and much that follows, is drawn from Bill Krohn's indispensable *Hitchcock at Work*, which is based on diverse production records, scheduled for publication by Phaidon.)

Another, less obvious aspect of the movie that feels very up-to-the-minute is the way it evokes the Sunday funnies. Apart from movies and radio, comic strips were probably the most popular vehicle for narrative at the time, and the movie's repeated traversals of courtyard windows capture some of the experience of reading one of those strips—especially when the windows frame one neighbor, travel-

ing salesman Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr), as he moves from hallway to kitchen to living room to bedroom, a journey comprising roughly the same number of squares as a daily strip. As Jeff becomes increasingly intrigued by the movements of the harried Thorwald and his nagging, bedridden wife (Irene Winston)—especially after she mysteriously disappears and Jeff suspects a murder plot—he finds himself "reading" Thorwald in precisely this manner, and the viewer is increasingly encouraged to "read" Thorwald over Jeff's shoulder.

It's impossible to know whether Hitchcock had comic strips consciously in mind, but Krohn told me he's encountered intriguing evidence that Hitchcock encouraged both Raymond Chandler, also his screenwriter for *Strangers on a Train*, and the film's production designer to study Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* while working on the film. Coincidentally or not, Frank Tashlin's dazzling comedy about comic books, *Artists and Models*, was made at the same studio the following year and features a gag that's explicitly about *Rear Window*. Fritz Lang read comic strips in the 30s to teach himself English, and Alain Resnais—surely the most Hitchcockian of all French directors—has said that most of what he knew about editing came from comics. (We do know that Hitchcock, in a private and intricate form of revenge, closely modeled Thorwald's appearance after that of David O. Selznick, the control-freak producer who meddled in many of Hitchcock's early Hollywood features. Five years later Hitchcock took another dig at Selznick in *North by Northwest* by giving his hero the same middle initial, which the character says stands "for nothing.")

What do Hitchcock's comic strips add up to? All the little stories about the people around the courtyard—who also include a honeymoon couple with a sexually insatiable wife who keeps calling her husband back to bed, a recurring gag few other Hollywood directors could have got away with in 1954; an avant-garde woman sculptor; and a love-starved single woman dubbed "Miss Lonely Hearts" (Judith Evelyn)—are variations on a theme concerning what it means to be part of a couple or to live alone, both situations being viewed darkly. It was an ideological staple of the Eisenhower 50s that family was everything and going it alone signified some form of quiet desperation and failure. Here, even the childless couple who sleep on the fire escape are perceived to be unhealthy because of their highly emotional attachment to their dog, and the lone, unattractive sculptor is seen working on a genderless figure with a gaping hole in its belly, a piece she calls "Hunger." Hayes's original script also had an adulterous love triangle involving two of the flats, which was replaced by the childless couple.

Two of the most poetic evocations of Greenwich Village to be found in movies, those in *The Seventh Victim* (1943) and *Rear Window*, were shot in Hollywood studios, and both are models of cozy proximity and narrative economy, featuring lairlike garrets and densely populated neighborhoods filled with mysterious artists

of various sorts. *The Seventh Victim*—the fourth and in some ways the best of all the horror quickies produced by Val Lewton, despite the convulsive beauty and dreamlike fluidity of the three Jacques Tourneur features preceding it—was shot largely on refashioned RKO sets built for *The Magnificent Ambersons* to create a claustrophobic vision of a nocturnal, bohemian Manhattan.

Rear Window, with considerably more money at its disposal, had a $100,000 set built—38 feet wide, 185 feet long, and 40 feet high—combining Jeff's living room, the only part of his flat we ever see, with the courtyard it overlooks. The set also included a short patch of sidewalk and street between two buildings and beyond that a bar, visible only when Jeff uses his telephoto lens to follow Miss Lonely Hearts when she leaves her flat. The fact that these buildings are supposed to be in the West Village may strike some viewers as beside the point, but to me it's central: Lisa's uptown and East Side trappings seem designed to contrast with Jeff's humble abode and carefree manner, and when, late in the film, Thorwald is sent on a wild-goose chase so that Lisa can search his flat for evidence, Jeff arranges a bogus meeting with him at the Albert Hotel, a Village landmark—which suddenly makes it clear that the whole story has been set in a very distinctive location.

Simulating daylight on the monolithic set reportedly required practically every piece of lighting equipment on the Paramount lot. The set contained thirty-one apartments, a dozen of them fully furnished, and those in Thorwald's building even had running water and electricity. Hitchcock gave some attention to color coding the background walls and costumes in these flats so that viewers could easily distinguish between them.

One reason Hitchcock loved working with such technical restrictions is that they forced him to use his ingenuity. In an impressive oeuvre, *Rear Window* is arguably the most exquisitely handcrafted feature, because Hitchcock mastered the spatial as well as behavioral coordinates of his chosen universe inch by inch. He can't juggle foreground and background the way Tati could a decade later by using deep focus in *Playtime*, but it seems at times that he's on the edge of some of the same perceptual possibilities—drafting the rudiments of a cinema of long shots that invites viewers to choose among the sights and events competing for their attention.

Rear Window has often been described as Hitchcock's testament because it sums up so many of his ideas about filmmaking: his fascination with voyeurism, his love of technical restrictions (which had also motivated *Lifeboat* and *Rope*), and his cultivation of certain stars—it was the second time he'd used Stewart (*Rope*) and Kelly (*Dial M for Murder*). It also sums up his ideas about editing, especially as a means for soliciting the audience's involvement in the action.

According to the famous "Kuleshov experiment" in silent Russian cinema, the

same close-up of actor Ivan Mozhukhin seen by separate audiences with a bowl of soup, or a coffin, or a little girl automatically conjured up a hungry man, or a mourner, or a pervert. As Hitchcock was fond of pointing out, the same principle is at work whenever the camera cuts from Stewart to the neighbor he's gazing at. Krohn reports that to give himself more creative leeway in editing—if not to create backup footage to mollify the censors—Hitchcock did many alternate versions of scenes and shots. (Perhaps the funniest of these involved the running gag of the honeymoon couple. Krohn writes, "Looking out at Jeff and Lisa, the groom is summoned once again by his wife and tells her to 'start without me'—a shocking suggestion that is explained when the shade goes up and we see that they have been playing chess the whole time.")

Perhaps because he's a risk-taking news photographer—a conventional adventure hero, at least by reputation—Jeff can pursue his somewhat morbid interest in Thorwald as a way of combating boredom while sitting all day in a wheelchair and remain the movie's hero. But this doesn't mean the movie lets him off without a reprimand. For one thing, Lisa has marriage on her mind, and Jeff is determined not to marry her. In a way, the story of Thorwald's married life becomes a dark, speculative glimpse into the life Jeff is fearfully contemplating; it's also an inversion of his own setup, with the woman playing the part of the invalid instead of the man.

Stella (Thelma Ritter), a plain-talking insurance-company nurse who turns up every day to give Jeff massages and take his temperature, serves as the voice of his reprimand for being a nosy snoop and the closest thing to a moral conscience in the movie. "We've become a race of Peeping Toms," she says early on when she catches Jeff leering at Miss Torso. "What people oughta do is get outside their own house and look in for a change." Yet as the evidence against Thorwald mounts, she gradually gets sucked in, spurred only by her curiosity and an abstract desire for justice. In this respect she becomes the spectator's surrogate, an index of our own fluctuating moral relationship to the events occurring across the courtyard. (This may be Ritter's best performance, though it wasn't one of the six supporting roles for which she was nominated for an Oscar; the only other true contender is her police informant in Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*, which *was* nominated.)

Jeff is the principal voyeur in *Rear Window*, but Hitchcock takes care to show us Lisa's and Stella's responses as well, which aren't always the same as Jeff's. Lisa, for instance, responds more than he does to the composer's music, and each of them is intrigued at different junctures by the plight of Miss Lonely Hearts, who's clearly tempted by suicide, though each subsequently loses interest in her. That they're more concerned about being amateur sleuths and capturing a murderer

than in saving someone's life is disturbing, and members of the audience are also indicted if they buy into the same narrative priorities.

Though neither an existentialist nor a Brechtian, Hitchcock remains a moralist, particularly when it comes to the questions raised by these characters' interests in their neighbors and by the transfer of guilt from one character to another—an essential Hitchcock theme discovered by French critics such as Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol in the 50s. Another essential theme is the degree to which morality is a matter of experiencing life in long shot or in close-up. Thorwald is a grim monster in long shot, the only way we see him for most of the film, but he's quite different when he's standing across the room from us—reminding us of Charlie Chaplin's observation that comedy is life in long shot and tragedy is life in close-up. The suspense in this movie is most potent when it hovers over such moral issues, as when Lisa takes risks on Jeff's behalf and he's powerless to stop her; the love story and the mystery plot are interrelated most complexly when she breaks into Thorwald's flat to retrieve his wife's wedding ring as a crucial piece of evidence, places it on her own finger when the police arrive, and then signals to Jeff from across the courtyard that she has it.

More than anything, *Rear Window*, without ever ceasing to be a grand entertainment, is a moral investigation into what we do and what that implies whenever we follow a murder plot as armchair analysts. Hitchcock explores the question from just about every possible angle, including the issue of whether we ogle our neighbors the way we ogle characters in plays and movies—from a dark place and a safe distance. The movie begins and ends with a theatrical metaphor—the raising and lowering of the window shades in Jeff's flat as if they were stage curtains, a symmetry that was brutally violated in Universal's previous rerelease version, which ends instead with the Universal logo.

Significantly, both the raising and the lowering of Jeff's shades are fantasy images of divine intervention. He's asleep during both events, and he's alone in his flat when the shades are pulled up; when they're lowered Lisa is nearby, but she's sneaking a look at *Harper's Bazaar*, not pulling the shade cords. The shades go up and down one at a time, without human intervention, and it's clearly Hitchcock himself, more deity than director, who's inviting us into his world and then ushering us out.

—*Chicago Reader*, February 25, 2000

Songs in the Key of Everyday Life

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg

Let's put it this way: It's 1957, and a twenty-year-old garage mechanic in Cherbourg knocks up his girlfriend just before he leaves for two years of military service in Algeria. Guy Foucher and Geneviève Emery—the daughter of a middle-class widow who helps her mother run a chic umbrella shop—make a handsome and devoted couple, and they swear eternal love to each other before he leaves, but he writes to her only infrequently. When Geneviève finds herself pregnant, her financially strapped mother, who's never approved of her relationship with Guy, virtually stage-manages a proposal from a visiting diamond merchant who's already helped her out of a financial crisis. By the time Guy returns from Algeria with a pronounced limp (the reason he didn't write), Geneviève has married the diamond merchant and moved to Paris, and the umbrella shop has closed, to be replaced by a store selling washing machines.

As luck would have it, I first saw *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) about two years too early—before my first trip to France. I didn't have a clue about how faithful it is to everyday French life. I'd already seen and enjoyed at least a couple of Jacques Demy movies by then: his ravishing first feature, *Lola* (1960), one of the seminal works of the French New Wave, as well as his charming sketch on "la luxure" in *The Seven Capital Sins*, one of the long-forgotten portmanteau features of that era. My trouble with Demy began with *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and with its alleged charm. A completely sung movie with music by Michel Legrand, it can't truly be called a musical, an opera, or even an operetta, though it borrows elements from all three. But to my taste at the time, it was a commercial sellout, positively cloying in its calculated charm—a sentimental festival of gaudy pastels (it was Demy's first film in color) that cried out for mainstream acceptance, and even had the brass to feature an Esso station prominently in the final sequences, a case of unabashed product placement if there ever was one. When the movie was nominated for an Oscar—something that had never happened with any genuine New Wave pictures, only with corny pretenders like *Black Orpheus*, *Sundays and Cybèle*, and *A Man and a Woman*—I concluded that the nomination only proved my point.

What a dunderhead I was. Moreover, my misunderstanding of Demy's achievement was shared by many others. In this country people got the idea that Demy was

a minor director, and stuck to that belief for the remainder of his career. I began to suspect the error of my ways only when I caught Demy's extravagant 1966 *Umbrellas* spin-off in third or fourth run, during my second summer trip to Paris—*The Young Girls of Rochefort*, an unabashed musical with an even better Legrand score, featuring Gene Kelly, George Chakiris, and Grover Dale (not to mention Catherine Deneuve and her sister Françoise Dorléac). By that time I'd seen enough of everyday French life to realize that Demy was very far from offering a saccharine treatment of it, that he was up to something much more complicated and profound. His poetic exaltation of the ordinary, bursting with emotion, had its share of dark irony as well as respect, and whether or not it was set to music, it was far more rooted in reality than I'd been willing to admit.

During my first visit to France I looked up a former teacher, who was working the night shift at a local newspaper in Rouen, and when I accompanied him to work one evening I was amazed to see him shake hands with every one of his coworkers when he arrived. I soon discovered that this kind of formality is also present in the everyday speech patterns of the French, who trot out formulas on all sorts of occasions: they're just as common in intimate conversations between lovers and close relatives as they are between coworkers or between clerks and customers. Almost in its entirety, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* is a heartfelt, passionate, tragic musical suite made up of these formulas, which the film both celebrates and wryly examines to discover their inner logic: how they actually work, what they do and don't do.

Here's another way of putting it: the very first lines of dialogue in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, all of them sung to big-band jazz, have in themselves a formal, almost musical rhythm. The setting is a garage, where the rain—which started behind the credits—is still falling. The camera keeps tracking back and forth, first with a customer, then with Guy (Nino Castelnuovo), as each looks out at the rain then returns to the garage interior. (The following translation is mine.)

Customer (returning to the garage): "Finished yet?"
Guy (working on car): "Yep. The engine still rattles when it gets cold, but that's usual."
Customer: "Thanks."
Guy: "Thank you."
Boss (in the background): "Foucher—could you stay an extra hour tonight?"
Guy: "Tonight would be a problem. But I think Pierre's free. Pierre—could you stay later tonight?"
Pierre: "Yes."
Boss (to Pierre): "Check the ignition of the gentleman's Mercedes."

It's the most normal talk in the world. But because this is France, where even everyday talk is formalized, it has a strong rhythmic pattern in the original French—the way the customer and Guy say "merci" to each other, for instance, or the way the two uses of "ce soir" ("tonight") and the "Foucher" and "Pierre" pair off like rhymes. Singing this somewhat musical everyday speech merely places its formal aspect in higher relief.

Guy, as it happens, can't stay an extra hour because he has a date with Geneviève (Catherine Deneuve) to see the opera *Carmen*—something an American mechanic would be unlikely to see (though one of Guy's cohorts in the washroom remarks twice that he prefers movies to opera). It all seems very normal. Yet someone seeing the movie a second time may note that the gentleman with the black Mercedes whose ignition needs checking is none other than Roland Cassard (Marc Michel), the diamond merchant who later marries Geneviève but whom Guy never meets. (Nor is this the only strange confluence in Demy's universe: Cassard, played by the same actor, is also a major character in *Lola*, a fact that's alluded to directly much later in *Umbrellas*; even Legrand's lovely main theme for *Lola* is appropriated here.)

Why this preoccupation with normal life? We learn from Agnès Varda, Demy's wife, in her loving film portrait of her late husband's childhood, *Jacquot de Nantes*, that Demy's father worked in a garage just like Guy's. But this furnishes only one piece of the puzzle. Demy's fixation on everyday life—especially family life—has, I think, psychosexual roots much deeper than the facts of his biography. The only real counterpart to Demy I can think of is the Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu (1903–63). His thematic and formal preoccupations also converge in a system of quotidian rituals—not only rituals like getting married, going off to war, having kids, and losing or finding work but also such minor rituals as saying "Good morning" and "Thank you." One of Ozu's sublime late films, *Good Morning*, is very much concerned with that particular salutation—as is *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, which has more than its share of *bonjour*s, each one musically placed. It may say something about the difference between Japan and France—as well as the difference between Ozu and Demy as artists—that Ozu's films are full of father figures and Demy's are more often bereft of them (with a few exceptions in the latter portion of his career). But their views of the human condition are surprisingly similar.

Returning from Algeria in 1959 and finding Geneviève gone, Guy quits his job at the garage to live on his military pension. At loose ends, he's almost as much of an emotional mess as the young veteran of the Algerian war from Boulogne in Alain Resnais's *Muriel* (1963)—perhaps the only other major French film of the period to deal with the traumatic effect of that war on French civilian life, an effect that in many ways was echoed by the impact of the Vietnam war on

America a few years later. (*Muriel* is likewise preoccupied with small-town life and everyday rituals, and it has formal parallels with *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* as well: just after Guy and Geneviève go to bed together, for the first and only time, there are rhythmic cuts to three locations, now empty, where we'd previously seen them, in a manner that explicitly recalls not only *Muriel* but the final sequence in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Eclipse*, made in 1962.)

After spending a night with a prostitute, Guy discovers that his devoted Aunt Elise (Mireille Perrey) has died during his absence. He inherits enough money from her to buy an Esso station in town and winds up marrying Madeleine (Ellen Farner), the young woman who took care of his aunt.

We move ahead to Christmas 1963 (about six weeks prior to the Paris premiere of the film): Guy and Madeleine are trimming the Christmas tree inside the office of their Esso station. They have a little boy now, and snow is falling in heaps (another ironic "rhyme," this one with the equally artificial and stylized rainfall of the opening sequence). Madeleine and the boy, François, go out for a walk, and Geneviève pulls up in the black Mercedes with her little girl, Françoise—Guy's daughter. Recognizing Geneviève with a start, Guy invites her into the office. She says that this is her first trip to Cherbourg since her marriage; she's bringing Françoise back from a visit with her paternal grandmother, she says, and adds that her mother has died. She asks if Guy wants to see Françoise, and he replies, "I think you'd better go." Their parting exchange couldn't be more banal: "Toi, tout va bien? Oui, très bien" ("Are things going well with you?" "Yes, very well"). In long shot, she drives off just as Madeleine and François return from their walk; Guy briefly plays with François in the snow, then all three enter the office as the camera cranes up into the sky.

The name of the Esso station is Escale Cherbourgeoise; this means literally "Cherbourgian Stopover," but if we consider that *escalader* means "to scale or to climb" and *escalier* means "stairway," we can read traces of a buried pun: "a bourgeois step up." Guy has become comfortably middle-class, Geneviève has become upper-class, and the class difference between them seems even more unbridgeable than it was before. And as for the Esso sign that gave me so much trouble, what better indication could there be of the Americanization of small-town France, a simple fact of everyday life that this movie treats like any other? Product placement or not, it has the ring of absolute truth.

For all the apparent sugar and spice of Legrand's memorable score and for all the candy-colored wallpaper, Demy's social observation in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* couldn't be more clear-eyed. (Twenty years later, Demy's class awareness and political consciousness were even more overt in *Une chambre en ville*, an original opera about a strike of naval workers set in Nantes in the mid-50s. Written without Legrand, it may have been his final masterpiece.) Demy charts with

withering accuracy the steps that Geneviève's mother (Anne Vernon) takes to snare the diamond merchant—a process that begins even before she discovers Geneviève is pregnant. But Demy doesn't view the process satirically or even judgmentally; he's simply observing in detail the way French people behave in such situations.

This describes the content of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, but the style can't be labeled realistic even if one ignores the music. Aiming for a heightened reality to set off the more mundane reality of his characters, Demy and his set designer, Bernard Evein, repainted whole sections of Cherbourg so that the colors would be much more vivid and coordinated than they were in real life; a similar approach is evident in the costumes.

This heightening of visual detail is the counterpart of the heightening of emotions and the sharpening of form achieved by setting the dialogue to music. (Though Legrand isn't credited as the film's cowriter, his collaboration with Demy, who wrote the lyrics, suggests that he may well deserve to be, for this is a film in which the score and the narrative are inseparable, shaped to the same architecture. Demy once noted that *Umbrellas* should be described as a film "in song" the way that some films are "in color.") Jean-Pierre Berthomé, who wrote the only book about Demy I'm aware of—the beautifully observed and richly detailed *Jacques Demy: Les racines du rêve* (1982)—aptly notes that when Guy and Geneviève sit together in a café on their last evening together, even the drinks they've ordered ("Geneviève's amber *apéritif*, Guy's canary yellow *pastis*") are color-coordinated with everything else in the scene. Demy's visual orchestration is the perfect complement to Legrand's musical orchestration; both create a powerful emotional intensification that perfects or contradicts the banality of the dialogue.

A friend of mine once noted that *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* is one of Demy's five masterpieces, but the weakest of the five; the four others he cited were *Lola*, *The Bay of the Angels* (1962), *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967), and *Une chambre en ville* (1982). (Berthomé writes: "I don't know if . . . *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* is Jacques Demy's most beautiful film. What I'm sure of is that it's the most perfect, certainly the one that's most faithful to the least of its intentions.") I'm less sure than my friend that *The Bay of the Angels* is a masterpiece, regarding it as campy, particularly in its glamorized treatment of Jeanne Moreau, in ways the other four are not. But *The Young Girls of Rochefort* has filled me with such unreasoning rapture—especially after I saw it in 70-millimeter several years ago—that I doubt *Umbrellas* will ever supplant it as my favorite, even in the vibrantly

colored 1992 restoration by Varda and Legrand, remixed with Dolby stereo, now showing at the Music Box.

The problem with such lists is that no American I know, including my friend, has seen all of Demy's work, which includes many partial or outright failures. Among the features, the partial failures I've seen are *Model Shop* (1969, filmed in Los Angeles; his only American movie, providing a fascinating take on this country, it's been unavailable for decades), his fairy-tale musical *Peau d'âne* (1970, *Donkey Skin*), and his last film, shown at the Chicago International Film Festival several years back, *Trois places pour le 26* (1988, *Three Seats for the 26th*, a Legrand musical that stars Yves Montand as himself). The only outright failure I've seen is *The Slightly Pregnant Man* (1973), though some have told me that *The Pied Piper* (1972) and *Lady Oscar* (1979) are comparably weak. But even this list leaves out the 1980 TV feature *La naissance du jour* (a Colette adaptation), the 1985 *Parking* (a non-Legrand musical), and the 1988 *La table tournante*.

Both Demy and Claude Chabrol have been unjustifiably eclipsed in this country, in part because their oeuvres are uneven. But if filmmakers are ranked according to their best work rather than their midlevel output, Demy is comparable in stature not only to Chabrol but even to François Truffaut. As entertainers, Truffaut and Chabrol are both clearly superior to Demy; but if one looks only at the greatest works of these three, it seems to me self-evident that *Lola*, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, and *Une chambre à ville* can stand unabashedly alongside such films as Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, *Shoot the Piano Player*, *Jules and Jim*, and *The Green Room*, and Chabrol's *Les bonnes femmes*, *La femme infidèle*, *Que la bête meure*, and *Le boucher*.

—*Chicago Reader*, May 17, 1996

A Tale of the Wind

Joris Ivens's Last Testament

"The Old Man, the hero of this tale, was born at the end of the last century, in a country where man has always striven to tame the sea and harness the wind. Camera in hand, he has traversed the twentieth century in the midst of the stormy history of our time. In the evening of his life, at age ninety, having survived the various wars and struggles that he filmed, the old filmmaker sets off for China. He has embarked on a mad project: to capture the invisible image of the wind."

That's my translation of the French opening title of *A Tale of the Wind*. It follows the credits, which accompany shots of a plane flying through the clouds and Michel Portal's primitive-modern jazz score for woodwinds and percussion. After the opening passage the giant blades of a Dutch windmill fill the screen, followed by shots of a little boy in an aviator suit on a windswept lawn, apparently preparing to fly away on a small plane to China, calling to his mother. Finally we see the filmmaker, Joris Ivens, at age ninety, sitting on a simple wooden chair in the middle of a vast Chinese desert, with a Chinese film and sound crew close at hand, waiting for the wind to arrive.

It's been four years since this prophetic and poetic masterwork was made, and it's just arriving in Chicago. But I wonder if we're ready for it even now. For starters, what do we know about Joris Ivens? Although he's generally considered to be one of only a handful of great documentary filmmakers, history and politics have conspired to make most of his work unavailable and unknown in this country. I suppose some would argue that this was partly his fault—because he had the bad taste to become a communist filmmaker and to work for much of his life in communist countries as opposed to the "free world." Unfortunately, the freedoms granted in our "free world" haven't yet included the opportunity to see most of Ivens's work. He's made more than sixty films, including antifascist work, work supporting Indonesian independence (which led to the withdrawal of his Dutch passport), and work in collaboration with Ernest Hemingway, Jacques Prévert, Gérard Philipe, Lewis Milestone, Frank Capra, Jean-Luc Godard, William Klein, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda (the last five worked with him on the 1967 sketch film *Far from Vietnam*). He died during the early summer of 1989, just before most of the communist world in the West collapsed.

A word of advice to film artists who want to get ahead: don't move around too

much. Film history often gets subsumed under national film history, so filmmakers who keep moving risk getting lost. And stay out of politics, since getting into them invariably puts you on either the winning side or the losing side. If you're on the losing side, many national film histories will write you out entirely; if you're on the winning side, chances are your film will date faster than last week's newspaper.

As critic David Thomson once put it, Ivens "is like one of those long-serving suitcases held together by the labels of a lifetime's travel," and his lifetime's travel virtually constitutes a twentieth-century history of socialist aspirations. Born in 1898 to a Dutch family heavily involved in still photography, he fought in World War I, became a student radical in Germany, managed his father's camera shops in Amsterdam, and made his first professional films, *The Bridge* and *Rain*, around the age of thirty. Judging by the international reputation of these two films and of *Philips Radio* (1931), his first sound film, he comes from that heroic period in filmmaking when radical leftism, avant-gardism, abstraction, and formalism were wholly compatible and even complementary traits.

Thanks to the impact of his early work, Ivens was invited by Vsevolod Pudovkin to make films in the Soviet Union, where he was the house guest of Sergei Eisenstein. That wasn't the only country Ivens was to work in, however; his subsequent subjects in the 30s included Belgian coal miners (*Borinage*), the Spanish Civil War (*The Spanish Earth*), and the Japanese invasion of China (*The 400 Million*); then came bouts of work in the U.S. (1936, 1939–42, 1944–45), Canada (1942–43), and Australia (1945–46). After the House Un-American Activities Committee identified him as a communist during the witch-hunts, he was no longer welcome to live or work in the States and made his documentaries in Prague, Warsaw, Berlin, and Paris; then came work in China (1958), Italy (1959), Mali (1960), Cuba (1961), Chile (1962–64), the Netherlands (1964), and Vietnam and Laos (1965, 1967–69). His longest stint in one place was probably in China between 1971 and 1976, when he codirected the twelve-hour, fourteen-part *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* with French filmmaker Marceline Loridan; otherwise, it appears that his main home bases in Europe were Paris and, more briefly (1979–83), Florence.

Loridan, thirty years his junior and a Jew who spent most of her teens working for the French Resistance, was his collaborator and companion from 1963 on. She is perhaps best known as one of the key characters and documentary subjects in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer*, filmed in Paris in 1959–60. Unlike Ivens, she makes only a fleeting appearance in *A Tale of the Wind* (in a satirical section about Chinese government bureaucracy), but she is credited as codirector (with Ivens) and cowriter (with Ivens and a young Parisian identified in the credits only as "Elisabeth D"). Judging from a lengthy conversa-

tion I had with her at the Rotterdam Film Festival in 1989, I think there is reason to believe she scripted most of the film. (When I compared the film to Jean Cocteau's *Testament of Orpheus*, she said the problem with that formula was that it left out Eurydice, and Ivens himself stated in an interview that "Marceline was the one who found the wind theme.") The fact that the film is essentially collaborative, in any case, is only part of the means by which it confounds many received ideas we have about artistic process and genre. Simultaneously a documentary *and* a fantasy for all 78 minutes of its running time, *A Tale of the Wind* is also a sublime auteurist statement—starring its auteur, but largely created, it would seem, by his lover.

> When the earth breathes, one calls it the wind. —Chinese proverb
>
> At the end of the twentieth century, I believe in magic. It isn't only science that works wonders. —Joris Ivens, *A Tale of the Wind*

Early in the film, we learn that Ivens suffers from asthma and has only one lung. Indeed, changes in his health while the film was being made became part of its texture and substance, and in some respects Ivens's project to film the wind, which forms the principal narrative thread, is a search for the wellsprings of life itself.

It is also a route into the riddle of China, and Ivens explores this riddle in terms of the past and the future as well as the present. Like Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief*, *A Tale of the Wind* is a film made for the twenty-first century, and Ivens and Loridan implicitly seem to be saying that if the twentieth century fundamentally belonged to the West, the twenty-first century already seems to belong to the East. This is not a message likely to flatter the egos of jingoistic Westerners—which probably helps to explain why *A Tale of the Wind* has not fared especially well in the Western world (it has yet to acquire a distributor in either this country or England, for instance)—but I happen to find the message quite persuasive. It even serves to account for why, in spite of this movie's monumentality and importance as a statement, it is light rather than heavy, playfully modest and charming in its overall address rather than pretentious and ponderous. (Some of the loveliest two-tiered compositions in the film, which juxtapose technology in the foreground with timeless nature in the background, recall certain comic and utopian deep-focus shots of Raúl Ruiz.) To put it crudely, the oedipal and Faustian neuroses that have so much to do with the West's tortured, ego-infested notions of cultural achievement find little room for expression here. The film is clearly addressed to the West and not to China

(Ivens, incidentally, speaks to the Chinese in French and English, and they mainly respond in Mandarin), and the overall message is to listen to all that China has to say.

The film presents us with many interlocking and interfacing histories, including the history of cinema and Ivens's own life. The film includes clips from two early Ivens works—*The Breakers* (identified by Ivens as "my first love story, in 1930") and *The 400 Million*—and from Georges Méliès's *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*, 1902), made and released when Ivens was four years old, which means when he and the cinema were both in their infancy. The brief sequence we see from the Méliès film ends with a rocket from earth hitting the Man in the Moon in the eye; the moon's mouth opens, and out of it, to our amazement, comes Ivens himself, strolling across the moon's black and white surface and encountering a Chinese woman—the legendary Ch'ang E., who fled to the moon after stealing her husband's pills of immortality. Descending from her crescent-shaped perch in the sky, she asks Ivens, "Aren't you sad to see your white hair?" This comes not long after the film pays its own separate tributes to Chinese poetry and to Méliès. The first is metaphorical: Ivens listens on earphones to Chinese reports of storms and tornadoes in France, Great Britain, Texas, Japan, New Zealand, and Mexico followed by temperate Chinese weather reports. The second comes when the film makes beautiful use of a Mélièsian tableau to illustrate (in color) a Chinese legend point by point: "Ten suns were threatening to burn the earth, and his majesty sent Hou Yi to fire nine arrows; nine suns died: the earth and mankind were saved."

The history of China includes everything from sweeping helicopter vistas of the Great Wall to a semisatirical depiction of the Cultural Revolution as a series of circus acts and scenes of village life staged inside a film studio that Ivens casually strolls through; he witnesses everything from acrobatics to a political harangue to a little girls' glee club intoning bloodthirsty propaganda in treacly tones. An impish Chinese demon and dancer in white greasepaint, at once benign and mischievous—periodically crossing Ivens's path shedding banana peels and unfurling a picture of a dragon—seems to represent another aspect of Chinese history, and when Ivens is seen leaving the film studio, the impish mask he's wearing reveals that he has briefly become the clownish monkey himself. The filmmakers' exquisite sense of wonder is conveyed to us shot by shot and incident by incident, in an unbroken series of epiphanies, and the handsome, elfin, white-haired Ivens becomes the string that holds it all together.

Both poetic essay and meditative fiction, *A Tale of the Wind* has certain affinities with movies as different as Jean Cocteau's *The Testament of Orpheus*, Chris Marker's *Sans soleil*, and Souleymane Cissé's *Brightness*, but it is too proud to owe its vision to any source beyond Ivens's own far-reaching experience and

research. Part of the film's inspired thesis appears to be that cinema and history, fantasy and documentary, have a lot to teach each other.

Ivens's travels along the Great Wall—"built 200 years before Christ by the Emperor Qin Shi Huang," reads a printed title—eventually lead him to the site of the army of seven thousand clay warriors that guard that emperor's tomb. After he and Loridan seek in vain for eight days to receive official permission to film this site however they see fit ("I'm fighting for my art and for my freedom of expression," Ivens declares to the authorities) and are told they can only film for a total of ten minutes from eight approved camera angles, Ivens finally gives up, purchases models of the warrior statues, and winds up creating yet another Méliès sequence of his own—one of the most stunning, magical, and beautiful in the film.

Still later, trekking across mountains and desert with his camera and sound crew in search of the elusive wind, he is told by a Chinese peasant woman, perhaps a witch, that she can draw a magic figure in the sand that will beckon the wind out of hiding. She needs, however, two electric fans, and these are promptly sent for and delivered to the site by a camel, leading to the ecstatic miracle that forms the film's climax. Like the Méliesian warrior sequence, it is yet another instance of folklore and technology, archaeology and fantasy being brought into sublime proximity, even a communication with each other. It is Joris Ivens's message to—or is it from?—the twenty-first century, if only we are brave and alert enough to listen.

—*Chicago Reader* (May 29, 1992, with interpolations from an article about an Ivens retrospective, May 10, 2002)

Kira Muratova's Home Truths

The Asthenic Syndrome

> Every time I am asked what the film is about, I reply, quite honestly, "It's about everything." —Kira Muratova, 1990

Seven years have passed since I first saw Kira Muratova's awesome *The Asthenic Syndrome* at the Toronto Film Festival, and while waiting for it to find its way to Chicago I've had plenty of time to speculate about why a movie of such importance should be so hard for us to see. Insofar as movies function as newspapers, this one has more to say about the state of the world in the past decade than any other new film I've seen during the same period, though what it has to say isn't pretty. So maybe the reason it's entitled to only one local screening—at the Film Center this Sunday—is the movie business's perception that it must offer only pretty pictures. Or maybe it's the radical, sprawling form of *The Asthenic Syndrome*—a movie that breaks all the usual rules when it comes to telling a story and clearly distinguishing between fiction and documentary, fantasy and reality, "prose" and "poetry," anger and detachment.

Or maybe the fact that it was directed by a Russian woman in her mid-fifties—even the most celebrated living Russian woman filmmaker, which counts for little in our culture, with its relative indifference to Russian filmmaking—automatically gives it the status of an esoteric specialty item. (It's playing as part of an excellent program, "Sisters: Films by Russian Women," packaged by Wendy Lidell—one of this country's key programmers, who introduced American viewers to filmmakers such as Raùl Ruiz and Hou Hsiao-hsien before the collapse of government funding for the arts ended her Cutting Edge series.) After all, we're told implicitly as well as explicitly by our cultural commissars that human experience is no longer universal: women are different from men, Russians are different from Americans, the elderly and middle-aged are different from the young, the rich are different from the poor, the educated are different from the uneducated, smokers are different from nonsmokers, Republicans are different from Democrats. Such, at any rate, is the way most products—including movies and politicians—are sold, and the way products are sold forms many of our philosophical presuppositions about what we like and who we are.

From this point of view, we might agree with Russian critic Andrei Dementyev, who declared *The Asthenic Syndrome* "the only masterpiece of glasnost cinema." It's certainly explicit about many of the horrors Russians lived through in that period—and are still living through—without being especially political or ideological in its attack, only ethical and humanist. Yet even though I've never been to Russia, my instincts tell me that throughout the cold war, for all the differences in the ways they lived, Russians and Americans were linked by their common subservience to the same "system"—a system that was neither communism nor capitalism but the cold war itself. And now that the cold war is over, we still seem to be sharing portions of the same destiny and life experiences, thanks to the confusions of the postcommunist aftershock and the whims of the global economy.

The central poetic vision of *The Asthenic Syndrome*—as relevant to America in 1996 as it was to Russia in 1989—is that two basic, debilitating forms of compulsive behavior are loose in the world today, extreme aggressiveness and extreme passivity: either people walk down the street picking fights at random with other people, or they go to sleep at a moment's notice, regardless of what's happening around them. "Asthenia" is defined in the American College Dictionary as "lack or loss of strength: debility," and some critics have given Muratova's film an alternate English title, *The Weakness Syndrome*. Apparently Muratova connects the syndrome to both kinds of behavior. Both, after all, are ways of being out of control. It might be said that formally speaking *The Asthenic Syndrome* is "out of control" as well. It's a film that alternately assaults you and nods off—usually without warning and often when you're least expecting it. Mean-spirited and assertive one moment, narcoleptic and in complete denial the next, it bears an astonishing resemblance to the disconcerting rhythm of contemporary public life.

As the opening credits indicate, this 153-minute film is in two parts, though the second part, in color, is almost three times as long as the black-and-white first part. It begins by cutting between a few disconnected and seemingly unrelated details in the same general wasteland; a boy blows soap bubbles that drift past refuse that includes a doll and a crutch; three women chant in unison, "I believed when I was a girl that if everyone read Tolstoy, everyone would be kind and intelligent"; men inside an enormous pit tie a tin can to a cat's tail; two other men converse nearby. Eventually a few details coalesce into a story line: the enormous pit becomes a grave site, and a middle-aged blond woman, Natasha (Olga Antonova), is burying her husband, a man whose mustache makes him look a little like Joseph Stalin; several other mourners are in attendance.

This sequence is soundless apart from music until we hear a piercing howl of grief from Natasha; then normal sound effects resume for a while. After she hears

a man by the grave site laugh, she stalks away, leaving the pallbearers confused about whether they should proceed with the burial; four friends meekly follow her, intending to bring her back, but she tells them all to go to hell. She looks at other graves, then at rows of photographs outside a photographer's shop. After lingering outside a florist's she boards a bus, its only passenger, and for a spell the only sounds we hear are of the bus. (Throughout this sequence the isolation and fluctuation of individual sounds express perfectly her fractured, alienated consciousness.)

As she gets off the bus, a pushy and argumentative crowd gets on; she gestures defiantly at them and shortly afterward picks a fight with a stranger by saying, "What's up? Want to sleep with me, you beast?" and then slapping him. He throws her down on the ground, and a nearby woman calls her a prostitute. She lies in a heap, screaming with misery. Her four friends catch up with her again, and she continues to rebuff them.

Back in her apartment Natasha pores over numerous photographs of her late husband and herself, idly smashes a number of drinking glasses, then throws clothes out of her closet onto the floor. When a desperate neighbor with a sick wife appears at her door asking for medical help—she's a doctor—she slams the door in his face, then goes to sleep on the floor. Later she goes to the hospital to resign her post, insulting colleagues en route, pushing people on the sidewalk outside, and going ballistic when one man tries to offer her some sympathy. Finally she invites a drunk to follow her home, orders him to undress, coaxes him into bed with her, and after a few kisses and caresses becomes hysterical and kicks him out.

This relentless black-and-white section ends abruptly in a screening room that's shown in color, where Antonova, the actress playing Natasha, is present for a discussion with the audience. But the audience isn't the least bit interested in a discussion and noisily gets up to leave; two members break into a fight, a child clamors for ice cream, and a man complains to his wife how depressing the whole thing was—when he goes to a movie he wants to be entertained. After several soldiers in the back rows leave, the only remaining member of the audience is Nikolai (played by Sergei Popov, one of the two writers who collaborated with Muratova on the script), a young schoolteacher and aspiring writer, the hero of the film's second part—and he's fast asleep. After rousing himself long enough to get on a subway, he steps off the train and dozes off again on the floor of the subway station.

The above account of the first forty-odd minutes of *The Asthenic Syndrome* may sound relatively linear and seamless, but I've had to omit a great deal to make it seem that way. And when it comes to the film's second part, where the intrusions of everyday street life and the loopy narrative digressions are far more

numerous, defining a continuous, coherent plot is even harder. Muratova's transgressiveness functions on so many different levels that it shouldn't be too surprising that *The Asthenic Syndrome* is the only Russian film to have been banned by the Soviet government during perestroika—though it wound up being shown anyway after the government sold the rights to a Moscow film club.

"I can't authorize the release of *The Asthenic Syndrome* because I am against it," declared Alexander Kamshalov, president of Goskino, the Soviet film ministry. Apparently the main objection was to a foul-mouthed monologue delivered by a middle-aged woman (not Natasha) in the final sequence—a monologue so obscene that, as a Russian acquaintance has informed me, even the fairly extreme English subtitles can't do it justice—though some commentators have suggested that some male frontal nudity in the middle of the film may also have given offense. Whatever the reason, these two details are scarcely out of keeping with the rage, passion, caustic humor, and playful eclecticism of the movie as a whole. To remark—as a few critics have—that certain sequences are excessive is about as relevant as calling the Pacific Ocean wet; from beginning to end this movie comes at you like a tidal wave. If you only want to get your feet wet, perhaps you should stick to some safe Hollywood mush.

One thing that gets Muratova especially riled up is cruelty to animals: many characters are defined in part by their relationship to pets, and one of the most powerful documentary segments transpires in a dog pound. The movie also abounds in screaming arguments, many of them quite funny. When Nikolai insists to someone, "We must educate the soul," his interlocutor replies, "It helps to cut off hands." A characteristic refrain in a debate among school staff while Nikolai snoozes nearby is, "Eggs can't teach hens anything; Turgenev understood." Another refrain is the ancient American pop song "Chiquita," sung by a crooner who sounds like Rudy Vallee—though the movie's eccentric musical highlight has to be a solo rendition of "Strangers in the Night" performed on trumpet by a huge woman who's the director of studies at Nikolai's school.

The film abounds in playful confusions. Nikolai, who teaches English, has two devoted students who sit together in class and are both named Masha (Natalya Busko and Galina Sachurdaewa); both come to visit him when he winds up in a madhouse. Doubtless there are other details referring specifically to aspects of everyday postcommunist Russian life that are too local to register with much clarity to outsiders like me. Truthfully, I found the movie a lot easier to follow when I saw it a second time and knew not to look for too much plot continuity, though I can't claim there weren't parts that still baffled me. The movie's a treasure chest, and if we get to see it more, more will surely become clear.

Nevertheless, the fundamental aspects of the asthenic syndrome come across loud and clear—and you certainly don't have to be Russian or postcommunist to

recognize them as central philosophical as well as behavioral strains in our public life. Jonathan Schell's reflections on the current presidential campaign in the August issue of the *Atlantic* provide only one recent example of corroborating evidence: He rightly notes that the American public's current hatred for both politicians and the news media, now perceived as a single class, seems oddly out of joint with the fact that both politicians and the news media tailor what they say and do to the polls—that is, to the express wishes of the American public. Does this mean these polls are wrong? Not necessarily, because it's the polls that also tell us that the American public hates politicians and the news media. (Whether these polls deserve to be enshrined by politicians, the media, and Schell is a separate issue.)

Maybe what this means, Schell suggests, is that the desires of the electorate are so poorly thought through that people can't deal with having them echoed in the sound bites of politicians and newscasters, which only exposes their inadequacy. If everyone wants the budget balanced without higher taxes and brutal spending cuts—a sleight of hand no one can achieve—then any politician who promises to achieve this impossibility becomes a liar, and any politician who resists the same seduction risks a serious dip in the polls. So aggressive hatred of politicians, the media, and the federal government can be read as a displaced form of self-hatred that ultimately expresses itself in denial—both forms of the asthenic syndrome working together. And the lies we require from Hollywood movies are no different. Perhaps that's why it's taken seven years for a film as great as *The Asthenic Syndrome* to get one screening in Chicago: it tells the truth about where we are.

—*Chicago Reader,* September 13, 1996

The Importance of Being Sarcastic

Sátántangó

If great films invent their own rules, reinventing some of the standards of film criticism in the process, Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó* surely belongs in their company. Showing Sunday as part of the Chicago Film Festival, this very dark Hungarian black comedy has more than a few tricks and paradoxes up its sleeve. Shot in black and white, with a running time of just under seven hours (it's designed to be shown with two short intermissions), it boasts a decrepit, squalid rural setting enveloped in constant rain and mud and a cast of about a dozen greedy, small-minded characters, none of whom has any remotely redeeming qualities. Yet over two separate viewings it has provided me with more pleasure, excitement, and even hope than any other new picture I've seen this year.

I'm not the only one who feels this way. Since the film surfaced at the Berlin Film Festival in February and was enthusiastically heralded by J. Hoberman in the *Village Voice*, it has enjoyed successful runs in Hungary and Germany. (In Budapest, Tarr told me, some viewers were willing to stand for the whole seven hours.) It has already acquired distributors in Holland, Italy, and Switzerland, and tickets for the single screening at the New York Film Festival were sold out even before the ad appeared in the *New York Times*, at which point about two hundred more orders came in.

On the other hand, at the second of two screenings held at the Toronto Film Festival last month, there were only a handful of people, though nearly all of them stayed to the end. Many of my colleagues writing for national publications admitted that they would rather risk seeing three or four bad films in a row than take a chance on this one. I suspect that part of what put them off is the chance they might really like it—which would interfere with their usual line of work. The very notion of a seven-hour masterpiece challenges the way the film business operates, especially in a climate where the value of a movie is largely gauged by the big-studio cash poured into its promotion. *Sátántangó* was shot over two years—120 shooting days in all—at a cost of a little over $1.5 million, or roughly one-twelfth the cost of a "low-budget" Hollywood picture like *Ed Wood*. And we all know that, regardless of how good or important it is, its chances of being recognized in the national media are nonexistent.

Sarcastic to the core, this movie demands to be read as a kind of interim report

on where humanity seems to be lodged—in a quagmire of cowardice, betrayal, self-delusion, alcoholism, and deceit, a place where people snoop on their neighbors and strive to cheat them behind their backs and where bureaucracy has become so encrusted in its own self-serving operations that buzzwords like communism, capitalism, and even Christianity have become meaningless, interchangeable labels for whatever grubby social and economic interactions happen to take place.

Yet I think it would be wrong to call this adaptation by Tarr and László Krasznahorkai, who wrote the celebrated 1985 Hungarian novel of the same title, misanthropic, at least in the sense that, say, Stanley Kubrick's movies are. Like Luis Buñuel and perhaps the painter Pieter Brueghel, Tarr and Krasznahorkai have a view of abject, self-absorbed peasants that is too passionate and too richly human to be adequately described as cynical or antisocial. When a bunch of their characters are seen elaborately dismantling a large cabinet outdoors while preparing to move from a depleted farm to an abandoned manor house nearby, the revelation that they're carrying this out to prevent "the Gypsies" from taking this useless piece of furniture is quintessentially Buñuelian in its comic—and cosmic—futility.

So far I could almost be describing a painting. But even though the action of *Sátántangó* covers only two consecutive fall days, followed by a couple of mordant epilogues occurring later the same month, this is a narrative constantly in motion—at least in the way we experience it—thanks to Tarr's elaborately choreographed camera style and respect for duration. Filmed in extremely long takes, the movie makes us share a lot of time as well as space with its characters, and the overall effect is to give a moral weight as well as a narrative weight to every shot: as detestable as these people are, we're so fully with them for such extended stretches that we can't help but feel deeply involved, even implicated in their various maneuvers. (This is somewhat less true of Tarr's two impressive previous features, *Almanac of Fall*—which Facets Multimedia recently brought out on video—and *Damnation*, in which Tarr's mobile long-take style is less tied to the characters' movements.)

When these grubby characters are indoors and relatively stationary, the camera tends to weave intricate arabesques around them, all but spelling out the allegorical spiderweb that the offscreen narrator evokes when describing the ties between these people. When they're outside and walking—most often in the rain, and without umbrellas—the camera is generally content just to follow or precede them across endless distances. (A master illusionist in more ways than one, Tarr told me in Toronto that all the rain in the film comes from a rain machine; real rain, he noted, isn't adequately photogenic.) Either way, the unbroken flow of the storytelling and our moral implication in the events are both essential conse-

quences of the camera style, and conversely the formal beauty of that style is never less than functional to the film's narrative and morality.

Unlike the postmodernist Hollywood specials currently commanding the attention of critics as models of art for grown-ups—adolescent, instantly gratifying compendiums like *Forrest Gump*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Ed Wood*, whose "eternal truths" (i.e., comforting lies) have everything to do with TV shows and other movies and nothing to do with lived experience—*Sátántangó* is a movie calculated to hit you where you live and to change how you think and feel about it. If all your life has been spent in front of television and movie screens, the movie may not register, because this is one of those rare films that address not "the media" but everything the media leave out. (Significantly, only two TV sets figure here: one is on the blink, and the other never gets plugged in.) One lengthy sequence of horrifying but bloodless violence involving a little girl and a cat—fashioned with such cunning that many viewers accept it as real rather than fabricated—has infinitely more impact than all the combined vats of red paint splattered about by Stone, Tarantino & Company and tells us far more about the world we're living in.

Nevertheless, the way this film interfaces allegory with realistic detail may distract us from the fact that its universe is brilliantly constructed, not merely discovered. Despite the apparent homogeneity of the godforsaken setting, the carefully selected locations are in ten separate parts of Hungary. (According to Tarr, the most "Hungarian" aspects of the film are its landscapes and its humor.) Similarly, the remarkable sound track, which has a tactile physicality and density, was created rather than found: practically all of the film was shot silent, and the dialogue and sound effects were added later. If the long takes, like the landscapes and the sound track, correctly convey the impression that Tarr is a materialist filmmaker, paradoxically his materialism is arrived at through methods that in some ways are the reverse of those of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, who tend to regard directly recorded sound as a kind of moral necessity.

Tarr told me that Krasznahorkai's novel, which hasn't yet been published in English,[1] consists mostly of internal monologues by various characters, each one structured in alternating clusters of six paragraphs, corresponding to the twelve steps of the tango: six steps forward, six steps back. Apparently a close adaptation, the film is split into twelve titled sections, and some of the titles are matching pairs: "Perspective from the Front" and "Perspective from the Rear," for example, and "The Spider's Work" and "The Spider's Work II." The first six sections carry

us through portions of the same day several times, from the vantage points of several characters; the next four give us the second day from only two perspectives. All twelve sections end powerfully with offscreen third-person narration—eloquent, poetic commentary on the characters and their world that I assume comes directly from the novel.

When I asked Tarr about what literary tradition the novel belongs to, he cited the contemporary Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard and, before him, Franz Kafka. The one Bernhard novel I've read reminded me of Samuel Beckett, and perhaps by default I'm inclined to view this novel's tradition in Anglo-American terms. Beckett is powerfully evoked in the film's third section—a mesmerizing tour de force charting for a full hour the chiefly solitary movements of an aging doctor lost in an alcoholic haze, hilariously detailing the amount of exertion required for an overweight man to drink himself into near-oblivion[2]—and the overall narrative construction suggests Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner.

I'm thinking here not only of Conrad's *Nostromo*, which concentrates on the events of a single day seen through multiple viewpoints, but even more of Faulkner's similarly structured *Light in August*, as well as such experiments in internal monologue as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Indeed, the doctor in the film recalls the Reverend Gail Hightower in *Light in August*, a fallen patriarch who might have served as his community's conscience if he and the community hadn't both deteriorated into an apocalyptic, postethical stupor.

Though Krasznahorkai's novel was written when "communism" (that is, what we and the Hungarians were erroneously calling communism) was still in power, and the movie was made after this apparatus came apart, tellingly the society depicted in the film could belong to either era. Similarly, though both the settings and the camera style suggest a despiritualized Andrei Tarkovsky, the film contains elements of Christian allegory, not only in the demonology of the title but also in the messianic qualities of a key character, Irimias (played by the film's composer, Mihaly Vig). Ultimately, whether this highly suggestive story is described as Christian, antitotalitarian, communist, precommunist, postcommunist, or some combination of the above is entirely a function of how we wish to apply its lessons, because its vision is broad enough to encompass all of these points of view.

I've avoided telling the plot because one of the film's central pleasures is the clever, carefully calculated unfolding of the story. But however fuzzy a few of the narrative details may be—an obscurity perhaps attributable to the allegorical context or to the occasionally awkward English subtitles—the story's main lines and its meaning are unmistakable. And its liberating gallows humor is like a tonic after the easy lies of other movies, a slap that returns us to our senses.

—*Chicago Reader*, October 14, 1994

NOTES

1. For those who are interested, Joëlle Dufeuilly's French translation, *Tango de Satan*, was published by Gallimard in 2000, and George Szirtes's English translation of Krasznahorkai's 1989 novel *Az ellenállás melankóliája* (*The Melancholy of Resistance*), adapted on film in 2000 as *Werckmeister Harmonies*, was published in 1998 by Quarter Books in London. [2002]

2. Production information about this scene and others in the film is available in "Falling Down, Walking, Destroying Thinking: A Conversation Between Jonathan Rosenbaum and Béla Tarr," *Cinema Scope*, no. 8 (September 2001): 21–25.

Blush

> The use of multiple perspectives in Chinese painting was not for the purpose of making a hologram, nor was the use of parallel perspectives for the purpose of retaining the true dimensions of the objects represented. What was desired was rather a point of view which transcended that of the individual. The apparent horizon and vanishing point employed by Renaissance perspective made the image seem concrete, but demanded substantial identification with a particular viewer. Such images were perceived as both individual and momentary, seen by a particular person at a particular time. Chinese painting strove for a timeless, communal impression, which could be perceived by anyone, and yet was not a scene viewed by anyone in particular.
>
> Chinese paintings did not portray reality; the world which the viewer entered was the realm of literature or philosophy, a realm which transcended nature. To enjoy a long tableau with small figures, one must shift one's line of sight left and right, or up and down, a necessary condition for the appreciation of Chinese visual representation. This reminds one of the tracking technique used in films. When viewing a 30 cm x 10 m scroll which can only be enjoyed with the help of two persons unrolling and rolling the scroll at opposite ends ("scrolling" it past the viewer), one is in fact viewing a lengthy lateral tracking shot.
>
> —Hao Dazheng, "Chinese Visual Representation: Painting and Cinema"

There are a number of lengthy lateral tracking or crane shots in Li Shaohong's *Blush* (1995), and most if not all of them proceed from right to left, the same direction in which Chinese is written and read. Though we don't often think about it, most lateral camera movements in Western movies proceed from left to right, the direction in which *we* write and read.

Of course, the relation of writing to visual representation isn't the same in China as in Western cultures. Anyone who attended the Art Institute's recent superb "Splendors of Imperial China" show, drawn from Taipei's National Palace Museum, noticed that most Chinese landscape painting contains writing—and therefore belongs to the realm of literature and philosophy, as Hao Dazheng suggests, rather than constituting a portrayal of reality in the Western sense. But because the linear flow of both writing and camera movement suggests a narra-

tive, the direction in which the eye travels inflects the voyage taken by a reader or spectator in following a story—even if this individual reading doesn't necessarily correspond to something "seen by a particular person at a particular time." (A few of the more interesting right-to-left crane shots in *Blush* begin high over a courtyard, viewing events below in a ground-floor apartment, before proceeding through a window into the second-story apartment—a journey no ordinary individual could take.)

It's been over a year and a half since I first saw *Blush*—the most emotionally complex picture I've seen from mainland China about the effect of the communist revolution on the lives of ordinary people—at the Berlin Film Festival, where it won one of the top prizes, the Silver Bear. It impressed me a great deal at the time, and reseeing it recently on video, I was only more impressed.

Admittedly, calling the three central characters of *Blush* "ordinary" may seem a stretch. Two of them are former high-class hookers at the same brothel, an establishment known as the Red Happiness Inn, located in an area called "Little Venice"—presumably because of its many canals—on the outskirts of Shanghai. The third is a former client of one of the prostitutes, a wealthy playboy who becomes an accountant after the revolution and winds up marrying the other former prostitute, now a factory worker. But even if these characters seem atypical, all of the action in *Blush* occurs after the revolution, when these three characters are scrambling to readjust to a new life. From this standpoint all three might be regarded as prototypical. *Blush* was adapted by director Li Shaohong from a novel by Su Tong, a popular short-story writer whose better-known works include "Wives and Concubines," the basis for Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern*, and "Opium," the basis for Ho Fan's Hong Kong feature *The Szechuan Concubine*. The only female member of China's celebrated Fifth Generation of filmmakers—a group that includes Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang—Li was born in 1955 but has made only four features to date. I haven't seen the first, *The Case of the Silver Snake* (1988), a thriller commissioned by the Beijing Film Studio. But my interest was piqued by the second—a loose adaptation of Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, known here as *Bloody Dawn* or *Bloody Morning* (1990); it was banned by the Chinese government but shown abroad. The third, a nuanced contemporary comedy-drama called *Family Portrait*, was even better. *Blush*, better still, combines the virtues of Li's two previous features—the detailed portrait of a community in *Bloody Dawn* with the canny domestic observations of *Family Portrait*. Like the previous Li pictures, it was shot by her cinematographer husband, the talented

Zheng Nianping; her cowriter on *Blush* was Ni Zhen, a film critic and film teacher who also worked on the script for *Raise the Red Lantern*.

Much of the action in *Blush* is filmed in long shot, and when I asked Li whether she might have been influenced by the similarly framed work of Japanese filmmaker Kenji Mizoguchi from the 30s and early 40s, her response was blank puzzlement. After I discovered that my pronunciation of Mizoguchi made the name indecipherable, and she figured out whom I was talking about, her answer was simply no: she knew some of Mizoguchi's work, but the visual sources of *Blush* were basically Chinese painting.

I bring this up because, as a novice when it comes to Chinese painting and Chinese movies, not to mention Japanese cinema, I depend on cultural reference points—and priorities for them—that are substantially different from Li's. On some level what I respond to in Mizoguchi's films may parallel what Li responds to in Chinese paintings, but we come by our responses via different routes. Consequently, I suspect it would have little or no meaning to Li that the Western film *Blush* most reminds me of is Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, though using that reference point here may not be out of place.

Like *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Blush* has an offscreen narrator who reports on events, gives impressions of the community, and comments on the characters, though here the narrator is a woman, and not one who should necessarily be identified with the filmmaker. (Welles does the narration in *Ambersons*; the commentary in *Blush* is delivered by an actress named Cao Lei.) Some of the other similarities are thematic (the declining fortunes of the rich, the cataclysmic effect social change has on lives and relationships, an overall sense of architecture as destiny) and formal (the aforementioned camera movements spanning action on separate floors of the same building, a preference for long shots over close-ups). On a deeper level, certain strains that might be regarded as both thematic and formal—such as individuals with blighted lives appearing to recede and blend in with their surroundings, becoming part of a much larger historical and social fabric, and the absence of a central figure who can unproblematically be designated "the hero"—are also common to both films. (As in *Ambersons*, all the characters in *Blush* are both flawed and sympathetic.)

Perhaps most pertinent is a sense of tragedy, in which moral growth (or at least education) is accompanied by a relentless decline in circumstances and fortune. This may be the most unexpected quality of all, for who in the West would have predicted that a mainstream film from mainland China could view the effects of the revolution with the dark, bittersweet irony that *The Magnificent Ambersons*

views the effects of the coming of the automobile? To put it another way, this movie offers a better critique of communism than any American feature I can think of.

***Blush* begins in 1949** with the rounding up of prostitutes from the Red Happiness Inn by Liberation Army soldiers, who transport them by barge to a new location for "reeducation" as laborers. One of them, Qiuyi (Wang Ji), escapes across the rooftop, fleeing to the house of her favorite former client, Lao Pu (Wang Zhiwen), who invites her to live with him. Meanwhile her bereft and miserable best friend, Xiaoe (He Saifei), is put to work in a textile factory, where her only consolation is a bundle of gifts messengered to her by Qiuyi. After being prevented by a soldier from hanging herself, she's asked in a reeducation class to explain why she made the attempt, and she explains that, unlike Qiuyi, she was born in the Red Happiness and has never known any other kind of life.

Lao Pu lives in a roomy house with his mother, and when she discovers Qiuyi's background she tries to get her to leave. (Her initial ploy is an attempt to bribe Qiuyi with some of her old dresses.) When this doesn't work, she exerts pressure on Pu, who finally relents and proposes to Qiuyi that he set her up in a love nest, a suggestion she angrily rejects, running off instead to take refuge in a Buddhist nunnery, where she's forced to shave her head. By this time, however, Pu's property is being confiscated by the government; he's forced to move to a modest second-story flat and winds up working as an accountant.

One night he brings Xiaoe home with him; the next day she proposes that he marry and take care of her, and he eventually agrees. Qiuyi, who's been expelled from the nunnery because she's pregnant with Pu's child, has a miscarriage and is reluctantly taken back by her family. She turns up briefly at Pu and Xiaoe's wedding banquet with the gift of a bracelet and, as an afterthought, the useless umbrella she's carrying. (The narrator notes wryly that the Chinese word for umbrella sounds like the word for separation.)

Xiaoe and Pu, who quarrel a lot, live above Mr. and Mrs. Zhang, who overhear and at times provoke their spats. Qiuyi eventually marries an older man who runs a teahouse (a character we never see). After Xiaoe gives birth to a son, nicknamed "Sad Man," her relationship to Pu deteriorates further. Pu, out of guilt and love for Qiuyi, embezzles a large sum of money and sends it to her, but he's caught and executed. (His execution is depicted on a rocky terrain in such an extreme long shot that we can barely make out what's happening; this is the shot that seems to come closest to reproducing the human and natural scale of classical Chinese landscape painting.)

In the film's final scene Qiuyi, who's learned that she'll never be able to have a

child of her own, visits Xiaoe and her baby. They lie in bed together in the dark, and Qiuyi says she can still smell Lao Pu's hair on the quilt. "How strange life is!" she says. The narrator then tells us that a year later "Xiaoe went off with a northerner," giving her son to Qiuyi before she left. "Qiuyi changed his name to Xinhua—'New China.' She raised him as her own and was content."

The above summary can't begin to do justice to the beautifully detailed plot and characters of *Blush*, much less to the emotional complexity of the narrator's closing lines—a mixture of terminally dark wisdom and barely nascent hope that might also have been apparent in Welles's original ending for *Ambersons* (the studio substituted a saccharine happy ending that is, alas, the only one we have on film). It adds up to a vision that's both cosmic and brutally down-to-earth about what the communist revolution did to people—a vision, I suspect, that is as quintessentially Chinese as *Ambersons* is American.

To approach the question of what's so Chinese about it, it's worth returning to the example of Chinese painting—the multiple perspectives and the linear "narrative" flow evoked by Hao Dazheng. For throughout the richly textured story and shifting spaces of *Blush* we're given the perspectives of three separate characters—each adding to rather than detracting from the perspectives of the other two—as well as a fourth perspective offered by the offscreen female narrator and a fifth offered by the camera's vantage point, which is distinct from that of all the others. As in Chinese landscape paintings, there's a continuity between interiors and exteriors, between human figures and their settings, between buildings and landscapes, between the abstract (notions such as "society," "life," and "the world") and the mundane (such as the umbrella and the quilt). Moving from left to right, or from right to left, from courtyard to interior, from one floor and family to the next, from life to death, from prostitution to revolution, Li's masterpiece proposes a way of reading the world as if it were literature or philosophy, a realm that transcends nature—a lengthy lateral tracking shot across history itself.

—*Chicago Reader*, October 2, 1996

The Ceremony

It's odd that Claude Chabrol is the most neglected filmmaker of the French New Wave today, at least in this country, because he started out as the most commercial and has turned out to be the most prolific, with the possible exception of Jean-Luc Godard. I've seen thirty-three of his forty-six features, but nothing in over a quarter of a century that's quite as good as *La ceremonie*, an adaptation of Ruth Rendell's novel A *Judgement in Stone*.

Born in 1930, about six months ahead of Godard, Chabrol came from a family of pharmacists (as did Jacques Rivette). At the age of seventeen he met François Truffaut at a screening of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, and ten years later he collaborated with Eric Rohmer on the first critical study of Hitchcock to appear anywhere. For four years in between he regularly wrote for *Cahiers du cinéma*—less memorably than Godard, Rivette, Truffaut, or Rohmer—under his own name as well as the pen names Charles Eitel and Jean-Yves Goute. In 1955 he worked as head publicist at 20th Century–Fox's Paris office. Like Truffaut, he financed his first feature by marrying into money. He also coproduced key early films by Rivette and Rohmer and served as technical adviser on Godard's *Breathless*.

His best films have tended to come in clusters. His two richest periods were 1958 to 1961 (his first six features: *Le beau Serge*, *The Cousins*, *Les bonnes femmes*, A *Double Tour*, *Les godelureaux*, and *Ophélia*) and 1968 to 1970 (*La femme infidèle*, *Le boucher*, *This Man Must Die*, *Just Before Nightfall*, and, a cut below, *La rupture*). The worst film of his that I've seen—and there are many contenders, for he's done a lot of hackwork—is *The Blood of Others* (1983), a film in English about the German occupation of France produced for American cable.

The plot of *The Ceremony* is fairly simple, but it's also full of ambiguity—something that corresponds at times to the elegant mise en scène. The very first shot, for example, follows Sophie Bonhomme (Sandrine Bonnaire) as she crosses the street toward the camera, turns to the left, enters a café, and is greeted by Catherine Lelièvre (Jacqueline Bisset), who calls her over. It's a shot lasting over half a minute, and something of a tour de force because it involves several camera movements and a continuity between exterior and interior lighting. What makes it ambiguous is that it seems like an objective shot filmed from the approximate vantage point of Catherine, who's sitting inside the café watching Sophie ap-

proach through the plate-glass window. It isn't until the shot is more than half over that we glimpse Catherine in the foreground and realize that what we're seeing is subjective.

Catherine is an upper-class woman living in Brittany with her husband, Georges (Jean-Pierre Cassel), her son, Gilles (Valentin Merlet), and her stepdaughter, Melinda (Virginie Ledoyen, star of the recent *A Single Girl*). Catherine is looking for a maid, and Sophie has come for an interview. In this precredits encounter both women seem serious and reasonable. Catherine, who insists on ordering tea for Sophie, explains that her house is large and ten kilometers away and that she manages an art gallery. Sophie presents her letter of reference, and they arrange for her to start in three days, settling on a salary slightly higher than Sophie's previous one.

The standard critical line about Chabrol is that he's a Hitchcockian, with a mise en scène periodically grounded in subjective camera angles. I can't deny this facet of his work, but an equally important influence, by Chabrol's own testimony, is Fritz Lang, whose hallmark as a filmmaker is a certain abstract objectivity, and it is in the play between Hitchcock's subjectivity and Lang's objectivity that Chabrol's best work usually takes shape.

Just as the first shot in the film is a Hitchcock shot that begins by masquerading as a Lang shot, there's an apparently Langian continuity cut that introduces the second encounter between Catherine and Sophie—a cut from a line of dialogue stating that Sophie will be arriving on the train at 9:00 A.M. to Catherine on the train platform at 9:00 A.M., looking for Sophie without finding her. (A "Langian continuity cut" of this kind is one that literalizes a line of the dialogue in the following image, such as the cut in Lang's *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* from a character saying that the weather isn't fit for a dog to a shot of a dog in the bad weather.) But then comes a subjective pan following Catherine's gaze as she spots Sophie on the other side of the tracks—an eerie play on expectations that qualifies as Hitchcockian.

"The savage derider of the bourgeoisie has become its elegiac poet," critic Robin Wood wrote of Chabrol in 1970, in the first and perhaps only book written about him. But it might be argued that a furious love-hate response to his own class has been part of Chabrol's work from the beginning and surfaces here in less apparent ways. It's the kind of ambivalence that could probably be traced back to Balzac, but more contemporary and perhaps more pertinent references would be the class tensions and resentments found in the thrillers of James M. Cain. Like Cain (and to a lesser extent early John O'Hara), Chabrol sees his bourgeois characters as insects trapped in spiders' webs; he both sympathizes with their plight and regards them as pathetic. Sometimes this has a subversive edge—if memory serves, the neglected *Just Before Nightfall* (1970) makes a strong moral

argument on behalf of murder. Yet the political meaning of Chabrol's relation to the bourgeoisie is still being debated. In one of his uncollected and untranslated "mythologies" (a series of magazine articles written over several years in the 50s) Roland Barthes attacks Chabrol's first feature, *Le beau Serge*, for the right-wing aspects of its "microrealism," its static view of human nature.

The Ceremony marks an important shift in Chabrol's view of the bourgeoisie; for the first time he seems to like his bourgeois characters without irony or sarcasm: they're a sweet bunch of people. Yet most of *The Ceremony* is seen from the vantage point of Sophie and her best friend, Jeanne (Isabelle Huppert), a postal worker whose hatred for the Lelièvre family grows to such unreasonable proportions that anything becomes possible. The brilliance of Chabrol's movie rests precisely in this dialectical ambivalence: one feels throughout that he has nothing but affection for the Lelièvres, yet he also understands deeply the murderous class hatred of Sophie and Jeanne and precisely how it develops. Like the ambiguous shifts between a Hitchcockian and a Langian approach, this ambivalence gives Chabrol's thriller most of its tension and edge. Significantly, his cowriter—Caroline Eliacheff, the wife of Marin Karmitz, the producer—is a psychoanalyst, and in interviews Chabrol credits her for developing the psychology and psychopathology of both these women beyond the elements found in the novel.

Perhaps the key delayed revelation in the film is the fact that Sophie is illiterate—a carefully guarded secret that accounts for much of her previously inexplicable behavior. Presumably this isn't a fact that's kept from the reader of Rendell's novel, which is titled *L'analphabete* (*The Illiterate*) in French, so I would guess that Chabrol uses it because he wants to establish reasons for Sophie's alienation from the Lelièvre family without telling us what those reasons are—as a way of keeping us curious about the character and transfixed by her behavior. (Her relationship to the TV in her room is especially suggestive in this regard; indeed, both TVs in the house prove as important to the plot as any of the family members.) It's Jeanne who wears her class animosity and her particular hatred of the Lelièvres on her sleeve, and who appears much more aggressive and rebellious than Sophie. But it's Sophie who takes control when the two finally slaughter the entire family.

Ultimately, the folie à deux of Sophie and Jeanne—their collectively generated madness—becomes the focus of our stunned curiosity, and it's part of Chabrol's considerable achievement to make us follow the horrifying logic of their behavior even when we can't fully understand it. (We may be reminded of the two lead characters in Jean Genet's one-act play *The Maids*—or of the notorious Papin sisters, who murdered their employers in the 1930s, one of Genet's inspirations and reportedly one of Eliacheff's reference points as well.) Is there an

unrealized erotic element in their friendship that can ultimately find expression only in violence? And what about Sophie's responsibility in the death of her father and Jeanne's in the death of her young daughter, two mysteries that Chabrol prefers to leave open? (According to an interview he gave in *Positif* last year, Chabrol and the two lead actresses decided that Sophie's father's death was deliberate and Jeanne's daughter's death was accidental, but there's nothing in the movie that allows us to arrive at these conclusions with any confidence.)

All we can really conclude is that together Jeanne and Sophie become a lethal pair, though separate they would probably have remained harmless. Taking the same principle further, these two murderers and these four bourgeois family members form a single complex organism that eventually turns on itself. Chabrol's heart may be more with the family, but he still understands their assassins with remarkable clarity, and *The Ceremony* pivots on the mystery of that understanding, a mystery contained in the Langian abstraction of the film's title. As Jeanne says to Sophie after they've completed their bloody work, "On a bien fait" ("We have done well"), a creepy line that's part of the plot's final twist—and a boast that Chabrol can make to his coworkers with equal justice.

—*Chicago Reader*, February 14, 1997

Thieves

"Before Christ was a time of orgies. Then came love."

"Love's less fun."

"Probably. In orgies you give your all. No more, no less. In love, it's never enough. It's always too much or not enough."

—a conversation in *Thieves* between a philosophy professor (Catherine Deneuve) and a policeman (Daniel Auteuil), who are in love with the same woman

When was the last time you saw a movie that was truly for as well as about grown-ups? Whatever the virtues of *Breaking the Waves*, a mature point of view certainly isn't one of them. *The English Patient* is at most a feature for dreamy young adults (especially those who consider it romantic for a character to become a Nazi in order to spend time with a former lover's dead body), and even the good points of *The Crucible* and *Ghosts of Mississippi* don't include the sort of insights that ought to come with age. *Mars Attacks!*, which grows in stature and audacity the more I think about it, is cannily likened by critic David Ehrenstein to the work of Alfred Jarry—making Nicholson's fatuous president a version of Père Ubu—but the merits of Jarry aren't exactly those of adults. Even the adept romantic comedy *One Fine Day*, which has a lot to say about the perils and complications of being a single parent, intermittently takes leave of its grown-up concerns and traffics in the contrivances and coincidences of its elected Hollywood genre.

But André Téchiné's remarkable *Les voleurs*—shorn of its definite article to become *Thieves* for stateside consumption—fulfills this category, though it does so in a way that may frighten off some viewers. A pessimistic film, but very far from a cynical one, *Thieves* postulates a fatalistic world bound by family origins and intense romantic longings in which every character is trapped into becoming a thief of one kind or another, emotionally as well as existentially. (The philosophy professor and the cop quoted above are only two of the guilty parties.) The fact that its writer-director is middle-aged surely has a great deal to do with the vision of life and life's possibilities the film has to offer.

Born in 1943 in Valence d'Agen, Téchiné wrote criticism for *Cahiers du cinéma* for four years in the mid-60s, including the period when Jacques Rivette was its editor. Téchiné went on to become an assistant to Rivette on *L'amour fou*

before directing his first feature in 1969. His early features—*Paulina s'en va* (1969), *French Provincial* (1974), *Barocco* (1976), and *The Brontë Sisters* (1978)—are basically the work of an intelligent if not especially original cinephile. But he asserts that starting with *Hôtel des Amériques* (1981), the first of his films with Catherine Deneuve, there is a change—which I have to take on faith, because I haven't seen any of his 80s films. ("From *Hôtel des Amériques* onward my films are no longer genre films," he said a few years ago. "My inspiration is no longer drawn from the cinema.") Certainly by the time he made *My Favorite Season* (1993) and *Wild Reeds* (1994) his focus was clearly and squarely on life, and his sense of film rhythm was derived most of all from what his actors were doing, even if the cinematic intelligence that shaped his early work had been not so much discarded as reconfigured.

The unusually well-defined cast of characters includes a family of thieves living in the mountains in southwest France—a widower and grandfather named Victor (Ivan Desny), his eldest son, Ivan (Didier Bezace), Ivan's wife, Mireille (Fabienne Babé), and Ivan and Mireille's son, Justin (Julien Rivière)—as well as Ivan's kid brother, Alex (Auteuil), who has rebelled against his family by becoming a cop in a Lyons suburb. Then there's Juliette (Laurence Cote), a former lover of Ivan who becomes a lover of both Alex and Marie (Deneuve), her former philosophy teacher. And there's Jimmy (Benôit Magimel), Juliette's brother, another thief, who works for Ivan. The action pivots on an attempted car heist at a railroad yard during which Ivan is killed—an incident that occurs just before the film starts.

Filmmaker Olivier Assayas, a former screenwriter for Téchiné, has compared *Thieves* to a William Faulkner novel, and it's easy to see what he means. The narrative—consisting of a prologue, five sections, and an epilogue—is fluid and easy to follow, but it leaps around in time and switches between the viewpoints of Justin, Alex, Marie, and Juliette. The Faulkner novel it most closely resembles is *The Sound and the Fury*, which unfolds over four days, beginning with the viewpoint of the character who understands the least about the events taking place—an idiot named Benjy—before moving backward in time to the viewpoint of Benjy's brother Quentin, then forward to the viewpoint of a third brother the day before Benjy's narrative, and concluding with a third-person description of the day after Benjy's account. Both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Thieves* also have a central female character who's loved obsessively by two of the narrators: Faulkner's novel has Caddie, who's loved by her brothers Benjy and Quentin, and Téchiné's film has Juliette, who's loved by Alex and Marie.

The novel begins and ends with Benjy's innocent reading of troubled family events, and *Thieves* begins and ends with Justin. After we hear a cacophony of offscreen voices behind the credits—the voices of the various characters drifting

together and apart like lines in a fugue—we begin with Justin's discovery of the death of his father, Ivan, whose body has been brought home and placed in the living room, and wind up meeting all the major characters except Marie as Justin encounters them over the course of a day. After this prologue, we switch to Alex in Lyons a year before Ivan's death, when he first meets Juliette, who's brought to his office for shoplifting, and we follow his story—which also involves Ivan, Jimmy, and Marie—until we arrive again at the day after Ivan's death and at the same family home, only now the viewpoint is Alex's. (The repetition of the action extends to such details as a plane flying overhead, and the mountains and heavy snowfall, along with certain family details, call to mind Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player.*)

Shortly after Alex and Juliette return to Lyons, she leaves him to see Marie, and Marie takes over the narrative. Then the story goes back six months to take up Juliette's version of events prior to Ivan's death—a section that concludes with the attempted car heist. Then we return to Justin a day after the events of the prologue, at his father's funeral; pass back to Alex ten days after Ivan's cremation; and finally return to Justin many months later.

Flashbacks as they're ordinarily understood have no place or function here—because, as Téchiné himself has noted, they're linked to linear and causal assumptions the film doesn't share: "We wanted the story to develop without using the convention of the flashback, which is intended to show the causes. We preferred to interweave the causes and the consequences by moving backward and forward around the central event, Ivan's death. That moment causes all the upheaval and turbulence to which the characters will be subjected." Though much of the film is clustered around the attempted heist—leading to a narrative structure that suggests Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* and Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, which was patterned in part after Kubrick's film—there are no thriller mechanics in *Thieves*. In fact, the abortive heist is probably the weakest scene in the film for precisely that reason; it was researched and plotted in detail—with cowriter Michel Alexandre, a former policeman who also scripted Bertrand Tavernier's police procedural *L.627*—but it's sometimes an awkward intrusion because its mechanics seem to come from another movie. (It's a familiar syllogism in French cinema that using elements from a certain genre results in a film of that genre; thriller elements or not, *Thieves* is not a thriller.)

If there are three more beautifully and complexly realized performances in a 1996 film than those of Deneuve, Auteuil, and Cote in *Thieves*, I haven't seen them. Cote, giving what is probably her best performance to date, has been seen in Tacchella's *Traveling avant*, Godard's *Nouvelle vague*, and Rivette's *The Gang of Four* and *Up Down Fragile*; Juliette's two suicide attempts, both convulsive and terrifying scenes, are only two examples of what Cote can do with this provoca-

tively unfixed and oscillating character—who's even more provocative when she mysteriously yet convincingly becomes both settled in her identity and all but irrelevant to the action near the film's end, after having defined most of its troubled center. (The unconventional narrative structure repeatedly displaces the characters, profoundly shifting our perception of them.)

Téchiné has worked before with Deneuve in *Hôtel des Amériques*, *Scene of the Crime*, and *My Favorite Season*, and with Auteuil in *My Favorite Season*—in which the two actors played a sister and brother haunted by unrealized incestuous longings. *Thieves* has another sister and brother who seem similarly haunted, Juliette and Jimmy, but here Deneuve and Auteuil play strikingly different characters, a professor and a cop, uneasily bound together by their rivalry for the same woman. In a curious way *Thieves* turns into a kind of love story between these hopeless loners—an ex-wife, mother, and grandmother who's fallen for another woman for the first and only time; and a divorced cop from a family of thieves who has also "crossed to the other side" of his destiny only to find himself in more or less the same place. When Marie records Juliette's life story or when Alex snaps a picture of Marie after she's fainted in his apartment, each of them is functioning as a thief and a hoarder, yet it's in the few moments of generosity and camaraderie between these two lost individuals that the film finds some measure of hope.

Deneuve, who's developed since her first major roles in the 60s (including *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, *Repulsion*, *Belle de jour*, *Mississippi Mermaid*, and *Tristana*) from a glamorous star into a remarkably subtle actress, here plays a character who suggests in many respects Téchiné's former mentor, the late Roland Barthes, a wistfully melancholic academic who wrote about many of Téchiné's films and who appeared briefly as William Makepeace Thackeray in *The Brontë Sisters*. (Barthes's book *Fragments: A Lover's Discourse* often seems echoed in Marie's rueful and amorous reflections about her former student, whose tape-recorded autobiographical musings form the basis of a book Marie writes. Even the title of a previous book she wrote, *Traces*, has a Barthesian ring.)

The gentleness of Marie's physical relation to Juliette—revealed mainly in a scene where the two women take a bath together (and where Marie's split-second, troubled glance at herself in a mirror while speaking is a perfect example of Deneuve's actorly skill)—is contrasted with the brutality and mutual enmity contained in Juliette's sex with Alex, which the film is equally candid about (and which Auteuil is no less adept at illustrating). American critics who glibly account for the alleged decline of European cinema by citing the increased sexual explicitness of American films can't possibly be thinking of anything like *Thieves*, where characters like Marie, Alex, and Juliette and their sexual behavior are worlds apart from anything one could expect to find in American movies—and

not because such characters and behavior are in any way absent from American life. (The film's frankness about hatred and passion between family members, lovers, and even acquaintances gives its emotional texture a kind of turbulence that even a grandstander like *Shine* can't approximate.)

The problem is acceptable canons. The European cinema presumed to be in decline is confined to the handful of titles bandied about in the mass media—the tiny fraction of European productions mainstream critics are equipped or willing to acknowledge. *Thieves* may be a dark and disturbing film, but it certainly isn't an inaccessible one. Yet a good many mainstream critics would probably prefer not to deal with its emotional challenges and intricacies—which might force them to rejiggle their definition and estimation of European movies. This masterpiece is a particularly telling example of the kind of richness that is factored out of their reckoning, because it grapples with life in a way that often seems to be the exclusive preserve of literature.

—*Chicago Reader*, December 27, 1996

True Grit

Rosetta

> I saw *Rosetta* three weeks ago, and haven't recovered from it since. In fact, I didn't see any film since the Dardennes', except films for work. It moves me to the heart of my heart, this film about the necessity of life, the impossibility of morality, the soil of human experience. [A teaching colleague] told me that he couldn't watch it because he thought too much about [Robert Bresson's] *Mouchette*, but precisely, it's at last *Mouchette* today, our *Mouchette*, the one we deserve, without any heaven and any transcendence. Her scream, "Mama! Y'a d'la boue! Y'a d'la boue!" ["Mama! It's full of mud! It's full of mud!"] haunts me, I can't forget it, it's exactly the despair of being in life without any pathos, any margin, just real life in the immediacy of the impulse.
>
> —e-mail from film critic Nicole Brenez

The 80s practically ended with the euphoric takeover of Tiananmen Square by more than a million demonstrators led by students, many with access to fax machines, though a brutal government crackdown followed. And the 90s ended with the disruption of the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle by an extremely diverse coalition formed through e-mail. It wasn't a throwback to the 60s—we're living in an era of greater economic disparities, where class is in some ways becoming a more significant distinction than nationality or language—but at least it suggested that people aren't powerless and sometimes can triumph over the designs of multinational corporations.

Forms of communication are no longer shaped by cold-war prototypes. Products and operations rather than national ideologies have made much of the world kin, and those products and operations function less like the front line of an invading army than like a long highway anyone can travel down—which may make them destroyers of national ideologies.

Even the multinationals are changing. Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's outlets in Japan aren't simply or necessarily promoting the American way of life. They sell corn soup at McDonald's in Tokyo—which means they're using American decor to sell a Japanese product and thereby promoting the Japanese way of life. Which isn't to say that way of life hasn't changed; who's to say what the Japanese way of life is anymore? Hot cans of corn soup and of Pokka espresso are sold everywhere in Japanese vending machines. Pokka is brewed in American

Canyon, California (though if you want to buy it in Chicago you have to go to an Asian supermarket), and the Pokka people can hardly be said to be promoting an Italian way of life.

All of this is a roundabout way of underscoring my point that it's silly for the mainstream American press to go on assuming that foreign movies are neither relevant to American audiences nor important. *Rosetta*, a Belgian film that's starting its second and final week at the Music Box, won the top prize at Cannes, and its eighteen-year-old lead, Emilie Dequenne, shared the best actress award. Its story, subject, and heroine are probably more relevant to the lives of most Americans—and have more physical presence and pack a bigger emotional punch—than the story, subject, and characters of most current Hollywood films. Nevertheless, most American critics have refused to give this current American release even a fraction of the attention they lavish on any American movie.

An American friend who recently returned from Europe told me *Rosetta* has already inspired a new Belgian law known as "Plan Rosetta," which prohibits employers from paying teenage workers less than the minimum wage (a Belgian news source on the Internet reports this passed on November 12). But the American press hasn't, to the best of my knowledge, considered this fact worth reporting.

What can we conclude from the passing of this law? One person at a discussion following a preview thought it meant that European moviegoers are more serious than their American counterparts, but I disagree. I think the different impact a movie like *Rosetta* has in Europe is mainly a consequence of how it's treated by the press. For instance, Dequenne appeared on the cover of France's leading rock weekly late last September, but she could never conceivably appear on the cover of *Spin* or *Rolling Stone*.

The film's reputation and therefore its power in Belgium is easy to account for. Local pride at winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes gave the movie a high profile—and helped it avoid being swamped by the millions of publicity dollars spent by Hollywood studios to ensure that Belgian moviegoers were more aware of the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger and James Bond shenanigans. In this country there's practically nothing in the press to prevent it from being swamped by even more millions of publicity dollars.

It's understandable that American audiences often wind up confusing promotional presence with cultural importance, since promotional presence seems to be the only gauge the mainstream media have for determining cultural importance. It's meaningless to claim that American audiences "prefer" *End of Days* or *The World Is Not Enough* to *Rosetta* given that most Americans have been bombarded with advertising for those profoundly inconsequential movies but haven't heard a word about *Rosetta*. Moreover, the very fact that millions had to be spent advertising *End of Days* and *The World Is Not Enough* actually helps demonstrate

that the media bias in favor of dumb big-budget entertainment doesn't suffice to sell it to the masses.

From its opening seconds, *Rosetta* makes it clear that its heroine is angry—before it tells us who she is or what she's angry about. Alain Marcoen's virtuoso handheld camera, which will stay close to her throughout the film, follows as she slams a door, strides through the industrial workplace where she's just been laid off for obscure reasons, and then assaults her boss when he insists that she leave. After taking the bus back to the trailer park where she lives with her alcoholic mother, Rosetta stops briefly in the woods and methodically takes off her shoes and puts on a pair of boots hidden behind a large rock in a drainpipe. This ritual is repeated throughout the film, marking the transition between her work and her even more solitary home life, where most of her time is spent keeping her mother away from booze and sex (her mother's principal method of acquiring booze), fishing in a nearby muddy creek, and soothing her stomach pains, usually by warming her belly with a hair dryer.

After Rosetta meets a teenage boy named Riquet (Fabrizio Rongione) who operates a waffle stand and has romantic designs on her, the plot thickens, but not predictably. Riquet finds her work for a brief spell, but she regards him more as a competitor than a friend; when he accidentally falls into the muddy creek trying to help her, she almost lets him drown because she wants his job.

Rosetta is a grim character in a grim set of circumstances, yet the film's writer-directors, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, are so ruthlessly unsentimental, uncynical, and physical in their approach to her life that we experience it viscerally before we get a chance to reflect on its meaning. Toward the end of the film Rosetta has to carry her mother across the trailer park, and it's extraordinary how much Marcoen's camera style makes us feel the weight of her body. The physicality of the film as a whole often becomes overwhelming; it's as if the Dardennes had converted the physical facts of Rosetta's existence into something resembling a theme-park ride.

To a lesser extent, this was also true of their previous feature, *La promesse* (1996), which brought the brothers their worldwide reputation. It's the tale of a fifteen-year-old boy named Igor who, like Rosetta, lives with a single parent, in this case a slum landlord who rents to recently arrived immigrants, some of them illegal. An illegal immigrant from Burkina Faso with a legal wife and baby son falls from a scaffold while working for the landlord, and as he's dying, the immigrant asks Igor to take care of his wife and son. Igor agrees, a decision that ultimately leads him to reject his father while coping with the scorn and incomprehension of the immigrant's widow, who believes her husband is still alive.

Perhaps what's most distinctive about the Dardenne brothers—middle-aged leftists based in Liège, a city in eastern, French-speaking Belgium, with a back-

ground in political videos and TV documentaries—is their utter lack of didacticism about their characters combined with a curiosity about them that gives them a novelistic density, ambiguity, and unpredictability. One comes away with the impression that Igor and Rosetta are both volatile and vibrant works in progress, existential protagonists in the purest sense. The Dardennes also seem to know the working-class locations in and around Liège like the backs of their hands, so their stories almost always seem plausible.

These stories are edgy in part because the Dardennes never seem to know more about their characters than they show. The moments at which *La promesse* and *Rosetta* end appear to be precisely the moments at which the filmmakers choose to stop imagining what comes next. Yet it's fascinating that it's impossible to guess what Igor will do or say five seconds after *La promesse* ends, and the same thing is true of Rosetta at the end of *Rosetta*. Some might consider this a limitation, particularly given the depths of the characterizations found in, for instance, Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*. But I regard it as a strength that the Dardennes' instinct for fiction closely parallels their instinct for documentary and that they refuse to claim more knowledge of their characters than they're ready to impart. Their work with Dequenne suggests that she operates the same way, with the same tight focus; interviews with the three of them have revealed that they have somewhat different interpretations of portions of the story that were deliberately left in the dark: the identity of Rosetta's father, the source of her stomach pains, the significance of the final scene.

Nicole Brenez and her colleague aren't the only critics comparing *Rosetta* to Bresson's *Mouchette*, and the parallels in terms of plot and character are hard to ignore. But there are substantial differences in style and philosophical meaning, and the stories end in drastically different ways. The Catholic context lurking in the background of Bresson's film and, I strongly suspect, Georges Bernanos's source novel couldn't be further from the social coordinates of the Dardennes' universe, and it's no slur to say that *Mouchette* could never have changed the labor laws of France. Moreover, the Dardennes' rigorous adherence to their heroine's viewpoint is a world apart from Bresson's more distanced compassion. Significantly, one comes away from *Rosetta* with almost no firm physical or emotional recollection of the heroine's mother (Anne Yernaux)—not because the camera ignores her, but because one feels that the Dardennes, like Rosetta, have given up on her. Mouchette's invalid mother, who dies over the course of the film, leaves a much stronger impression.

For that matter, the profound sense of mystery evoked by Bresson's characters, including Mouchette, can't be equated with the curiosity provoked by Igor and Rosetta, especially because Bresson's characters always register as fixed essences and never as works in progress. When Rosetta rejects Riquet's offer of a beer, then

suddenly asks him for one and drains it in a single gulp, we're led to believe that her previous avoidance of both liquor and sex might be motivated by a fear of becoming like her mother—and by a desire to succumb to both temptations that frightens her even more. In this wonderfully observant and beautifully performed comic sequence, Riquet's clumsy attempts to show off first his skill at gymnastics and then his skill at drumming, followed by his efforts to get Rosetta to dance, are met by her with amusement, then bravado, and finally clunky gestures. This scene gives us a sense of the wonderful things the Dardennes can do with actors, which are a far cry from Bresson's own formidable yet very different accomplishments with nonactors.

***Rosetta* is alive with** a sense of urgency as well as currency, even though there's nothing remotely preachy about it. American reviewers who insist on treating it as minor and then treat something like *Dogma* as a heady challenge seem to be implying that we're all such infantile escapists at heart that we can't possibly be interested in a movie that concerns anything as real as finding a job.

I've heard that one critic has attacked *Rosetta* for not being Brechtian. I'm tempted to counter that the veritable theme song of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*—"First comes bread, then comes morals"—could easily serve as one of Rosetta's rationales for her behavior. But then I recall Hannah Arendt's gloss on how this line was received in pre-Hitler Germany. It was "greeted with frantic applause by exactly everybody, though for different reasons. The mob applauded because it took the statement literally; the bourgeoisie applauded because it had been fooled by its own hypocrisy for so long that it had grown tired of the tension and found deep wisdom in the expression of the banality by which it lived; the elite applauded because the unveiling of hypocrisy was such superior and wonderful fun. The effect of the work was exactly the opposite of what Brecht had sought by it."

I don't think it's possible to misread *Rosetta* in any of the ways outlined by Arendt, so perhaps I'm misreading the film critic. Clearly *Rosetta* isn't esoteric or cerebral or difficult to understand; it isn't remotely boring or even slightly pretentious. Its only crimes are that it isn't in English (though it doesn't have much dialogue anyway), it has something powerful to say about what's happening right now across the planet, and millions haven't been spent promoting it.

—*Chicago Reader*, January 14, 2000

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Malick's Progress

Last week the National Society of Film Critics voted Steven Soderbergh's *Out of Sight* the year's best picture, also awarding it best screenplay and best direction. If this baffles or bemuses you, you should know that the awards in each category are chosen by multiple ballots listing three titles in order of preference. What now seems like a collective preference for a sexy thriller over more ambitious pictures was in effect a tie-breaker between two irreconcilable positions.

As a participant in the meeting I saw partisans of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* square off against partisans of *The Thin Red Line*, Terrence Malick's first film since *Days of Heaven* (1978). Practically no one voted for both—only Michael Wilmington of the *Chicago Tribune* comes to mind—so Steven Soderbergh lurched forward as a second choice, finally copping twenty-eight votes while Spielberg and Malick tied for second place with twenty-five votes apiece. Like some of my colleagues, I wound up voting for Soderbergh along with Malick not because I favored *Out of Sight* but because I wanted to elbow out Spielberg; quite apart from my dislike of *Saving Private Ryan*, it seemed fruitless to throw the NSFC's endorsement behind a movie that doesn't need it. Apparently others felt the same: at the end of the day, *Saving Private Ryan* won no awards at all, and *The Thin Red Line* took only one, for John Toll's cinematography. (According to Dave Kehr, a similar squaring off occurred at the NSFC twenty years ago when *Days of Heaven* tied with *The Deer Hunter* and the honors went to *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*.)

The vote was meaningful to NSFC members even if it sounded like gibberish to the outside world: a split difference, one might say, between entertainment and art—between flag-waving and reflection, prose and poetry, public consensus and private reverie—though the actual winner engaged none of these issues. But in our ridiculously skewed culture, this dialectical distinction between Spielberg and Malick was arrived at almost as arbitrarily as the dark horse that broke ahead of both. Both films are about World War II and were made by major studios, but that's about the extent of their similarity.

A person could more profitably compare *The Thin Red Line*, currently playing at McClurg Court, with Rob Tregenza's *Inside/Out*, playing in a one-week run at Facets Multimedia Center. The parallels between these two epic experiments are

pretty striking. Each is the third feature of a prodigiously talented middle-aged eccentric and original thinker with a background in existential philosophy that informs every artistic move he makes. Both films are shot in wide-screen 35-millimeter with Dolby sound (though Tregenza's film is in black and white). And both filmmakers are passionately (and unfashionably) devoted to the aesthetics of silent cinema: *The Thin Red Line* makes as many visual references to F. W. Murnau's *Tabu* (1931) as *Days of Heaven* makes to Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) and *City Girl* (1930), and Tregenza, who likes to film pantomimes in long shot, includes on his Web site a beautiful quotation from Luigi Pirandello that applies almost as well to Malick's film: "The screenplay should remain a wordless art because it is essentially a medium for the expression of the unconscious." The films share certain narrative strategies as well. Both discard the conventions of a central character and a single story, running a relay between many disparate characters in the same rural setting, none of whom is subjected to any moral judgment. And both are a little too long for what they can achieve dramatically—Tregenza's film is just under two hours, Malick's just under three—but that's because both are overly ambitious. If you agree with me that 90 percent of the movies made nowadays are insufficiently ambitious, being overly ambitious is a shared flaw that deserves our deepest respect. Both filmmakers value physical environment as much as action in the ordinary sense, and both—albeit in very different ways—use the cleavage and disruptions produced by World War II to reflect on the second half of the twentieth century.

Yet they're playing to different audiences in radically different venues. *Inside/Out*—made for a tiny fraction of the other picture's budget, with no stars to speak of—has had too limited and piecemeal a national release since its 1997 premiere at Cannes to qualify even as a minor contender in any present or future NSFC awards, even in the experimental category. No articles about *Inside/Out* will show up in *Vanity Fair* or *Premiere*, no reviews will grace mainstream magazines or TV shows, no qualifying Oscar screenings will be held anywhere. Economically and culturally speaking—which in this country generally amounts to the same thing—the two pictures are never going to be permitted to inhabit the same universe. The fact that Tregenza's distribution company, Cinema Parallel, has allowed us to see Michael Haneke's *The Seventh Continent*, Bela Tarr's *Sátántangó*, Jacques Rivette's *Up Down Fragile*, and several recent films by Jean-Luc Godard locates him in a separate cosmos as far as most critics are concerned. So any context that can accommodate him and Malick has to be created by the audience.

I haven't read the James Jones novel Malick based his film on, but Norman Mailer's 1964 review of it sounds so relevant that I wonder if Malick might have read it: "Jones's book is better remembered as satisfying, as if one had studied

geology for a semester and now knew more. I suppose what was felt lacking is the curious sensuousness of combat, the soft lift of awe and pleasure that one was moving out onto the rim of the dead. If one was not too tired, there were times when a blade of grass coming out of the ground was as significant as the finger of Jehovah in the Sistine Chapel. And this was not because a blade of grass was necessarily in itself so beautiful, or because hitting the dirt was so sweet, but because the blade seemed to be a living part of the crack of small-arms fire and the palpable flotation of all the other souls in the platoon full of turd and glory."

Mailer goes on to admit that Jones was not "altogether ignorant of this state," and his and Jones's macho sensibility is far from Malick's vision. But few war movies have been as attentive to the significance and even the sanctity of a blade of grass, not to mention the sensuousness of "the crack of small-arms fire and the palpable flotation of all the other souls" in a platoon, as *The Thin Red Line*. In *Days of Heaven* Malick's preoccupation with the ecology made for wondrous images even when they seemed extraneous to the story, but this time they're wedded solidly to the theme and the narrative, and the notion of a collective hero speaking from a single consciousness is powerfully articulated.

Malick's intimate acquaintance with the aesthetics of silent cinema reaches well past Murnau. The punctuating shots of nature in the midst of combat—a wounded bird, a riddled leaf, a hill of waving grass—are pure silent-movie syntax, as is the notion of a collective war hero (often found in films and fiction about World War I; William March's 1933 book *Company K* is one distinguished example). The poetic and philosophical internal monologues of Malick's various soldiers, often paired with a sustained and soulful close-up of the character, are the structural equivalent of intertitles in silent films of the teens and 20s. This is a precious legacy that most major filmmakers of the 90s (excepting Godard, Tarr, Tregenza, Manuel de Oliveira, and a handful of others who live outside the Oscars sweepstakes) have either forgotten or never discovered in the first place—a sensibility that frees images from the tyranny of the sound track, allowing them to register in all their primordial power—and the major achievements of *The Thin Red Line* would be unthinkable without it.

Malick does this not to minimize the importance of spoken language in the film—most of which, apart from rudimentary exposition of character and situation, boils down to a running internal debate about "war in the heart of nature" ("Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power but two?") and the claims of the material world versus transcendence—but to stress how detachable it is from the expressiveness of the images. In a way it all harks back to a manifesto about the sound film drafted by Sergei Eisenstein and cosigned by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov in 1928, which argued, in capital letters no less, "THE FIRST EXPERIMENTAL WORK WITH SOUND MUST BE DIRECTED ALONG THE

LINE OF ITS DISTINCT NONSYNCHRONIZATION WITH THE VISUAL IMAGES." Malick's poetic and philosophical language—which periodically turns all his soldiers into soul-searching poets who share the same literary style, for better and for worse—is enhanced by this principle, which obliges us to confront the discourse on its own terms rather than as part of an unfolding plot. There are moments when the internal monologues dovetail into dialogue and vice versa, but overall this language creates a zone of reflection throughout the film quite separate from issues of plot, character, and history, a zone of spiritual self-interrogation that ultimately exists outside the coordinates of time and space governing the remainder of the film.

This is Malick's triumph, but it also becomes his problem. To embrace silent-film language is also to reclaim some of its ideological baggage, which in this case means denying the second half of the twentieth century. Most of the period details seem accurate—though I wonder about one soldier's recurring line, "I'm outta here"—but as a depiction of World War II it lacks any living sense of the 40s. (Some of the film's defenders, thinking perhaps of the opening shot of a crocodile, claim that it encompasses the Vietnam experience. But while some moments recall *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*—Nick Nolte's blustering colonel, the invasion and torching of a peasant village—these remind us more of movies about the war than the war itself.)

Before seeing Malick's film, I asked a friend who'd been to an early screening whether it had much to say about World War II. He replied, "It's more ambitious than that." But expanding (or reducing) the issues and experiences of Guadalcanal to all wars can be an act of denial as well as courage, just as reducing (or expanding) a film about nature in Guadalcanal (actually filmed in the Daintree rain forest of Queensland, Australia) to a film about nature in general involves a comparable kind of shortchanging. In both cases, the level of abstraction needed to carry out the conceit can turn the film into a series of airy platitudes, divorced from history and geography alike. In some respects, Leo Tolstoy took a comparable risk when he decided that his theory of history as applied to Napoleon's invasion of Russia somehow mattered more than the invasion itself. And while Malick may not be operating anywhere near Tolstoy's level of achievement, his overreaching lands him in a similar kind of trouble.

To be sure, *The Thin Red Line* periodically rejuvenates the genre of epic war film in moral, sensual, and philosophical terms, at no point engaging in the sort of fatuous drum-beating that Joe Dante's recent *Small Soldiers* makes such effective sport of. Sean Penn and Nick Nolte give the freshest and least rhetorical performances I've ever seen from them—not so much because Malick defines their characters complexly but because he refuses to judge them, leaving that to other characters whose assessments we can either accept or reject. (In the case of

Nolte's Colonel Tall, the colonel himself implicitly issues most of these judgments, progressively undercutting his own positions as he reassesses the wisdom of his decisions.) Other actors (Elias Koteas, John Travolta in a smaller part) shine in this environment, and Toll's cinematography is lustrous throughout. The film is full of excitements and beauties, but all three times I've seen it, it starts to defeat me by the third hour because the level of generality isn't sustained by enough particularity. I become sufficiently detached from Malick's own level of detachment to become bored, and then to start wondering what he had to omit about this war and its terrain for his generalizations to make sense.

In a discussion we had about the film in the on-line magazine *Slate*, critic David Edelstein described for me the film's "mythos": "We begin in Eden, we go to hell, we return to Eden." Malick's Eden recalls Murnau's Polynesian Eden in *Tabu:* the latter is polluted by civilization just as Malick's Eden is polluted by war, with the expressionist arrival of a fateful ship. But images like these depend on our ignorance of both places, a desire for innocence that's touching but debilitating. Not as debilitating as our willful innocence about war, which *Saving Private Ryan* ultimately caters to, but debilitating all the same: in *The Thin Red Line* the peaceful, frolicking Melanesians come to us through Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), whose affection and soulful compassion for them gets more screen time than the natives themselves. When Japanese soldiers belatedly enter the picture, we may be so grateful to Malick for refusing to stylize them as villains that we may overlook his mythologizing of their "simple" humanity. This is the negative side of Malick's embrace of silent cinema, but it shouldn't dissuade anyone from rushing off to see *The Thin Red Line* before it closes (which is likely to happen fairly soon). Whatever its limitations, it's the most impressive work to date in Malick's splintered career.

—*Chicago Reader*, January 15, 1999

Improvisations and Interactions in Altmanville

Unless it is claimed that a pianist's hands move haphazardly up and down the keyboard—and no one would be willing to claim this seriously—it must be admitted that there exists a guiding thought, conscious or subconscious, behind the succession of organized sound patterns. . . . Of course, it does happen, and not too infrequently, that an instrumentalist's fingers "recite" a lesson they have learned; but in such cases there is no reason to talk about creation. —André Hodeir, *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence* (1956)

I can never think and play at the same time. It's emotionally impossible.
—Lennie Tristano, circa 1962

Charlie (Elliott Gould): This is the truth. You're an animal lover, right?
Susan (Gwen Welles): Yeah.
Charlie: Okay, well: the great blue whale, right? You know about a great blue whale?
Susan (semi-audible): . . . got that wrestling guy, hunh?
Charlie: No, it's a big fish, a big fish, there's only two or three left in the world. And the truth—the tongue of the great blue whale weighs more than a full, grown, African elephant . . .
Susan: No, that's not true.
Charlie: You don't believe it.
Susan: You're just making it up to make me feel better—
Charlie: Aw—
Susan: —'cause you don't like to see me cry.
Charlie: You feel a little better?
Susan (sniffing): Yeah, I do. —*California Split*

The first quote comes from a theorist, the second from a jazz pianist; together they only begin to describe the difficulties and ambiguities attending any effort to describe the aesthetic conditions of improvisation for audience, improviser, and theorist alike. Taking the third quote as a test case, it is hard to know where to begin. Is the dialogue written or improvised? Is the scene—Susan, a prostitute, arrives home in tears after falling for yet another of her clients; Charlie, her flat mate, goes to her room to cheer her up—an integral part of Joseph Walsh's script

or something that Robert Altman and/or Gould and Welles partially or completely concocted on the set?

A skeptic could remark with some justice that it makes no difference; the results on the screen are all that count. But the fact that these results give an unmistakable impression of improvisation—as evidenced by such factors as Gould's loose, evolving syntax and Welles's semi-audible, equally vague reference to "that wrestling guy"—is a matter of some importance; without it, our responses to the scene would simply not be the same. If Gould's rap and delivery were more polished, our attention would be focused on his whole statement as a single gesture: Charlie spouts nonsense to make Susan feel better. But in the scene as played, what we observe is the emphatic (if somewhat ham-fisted) exposition of Charlie's nonsense and Susan's reactions, motored on suspense and an element of risk.

One hesitates to make too much of a scene that is small and, for Altman, unexceptional; but the distinction is crucial. Well-composed, cleanly delivered dialogue would perhaps convey an implied moral judgment: Charlie cheers up Susan, therefore he's "good." Throwing this emphasis slightly off center, Altman invites us to judge Charlie/Gould, aesthetically as well as morally, on a moment-to-moment basis. Like a matador coordinating his gestures to the unpredictable but inescapable movements of a bull, or a jazz improviser accommodating himself to fellow musicians and chord changes, Charlie/Gould is wriggling his way into the imponderables of a given emotional situation, and to respond directly to his behavior we have to wriggle accordingly; so, for that matter, does Susan/Welles.

The difference between conventional methods and Altman's is one between directness and indirectness, actions and interactions—the actors', the characters', the director's, the scriptwriter's, and our own. It is decidedly a group endeavor, and, as such, one that lives and breathes in an intangible no-man's-land between "thinking" and "playing" for the filmmakers, "thinking" and spontaneous "reacting" for the audience: the relative strengths of both values are held in perpetual suspension, with new stimuli that can potentially shift the balance coming along at every juncture. From this point of view, anything can affect everything, and no two spectators are responding to precisely the same film—the complete "text" is common to all, but each reading of it varies according to attentiveness, temperament, and perceptual capacity: an individual selection of what is interesting or relevant and what is not.

This is not an approach that Altman can be said to have pursued with any rigorous consistency, although it seems to figure at one level or another in all his films since *Brewster McCloud*. Minor details notwithstanding, it cannot be found to any appreciable degree in the box-office hit that made Altman's name commercially negotiable and the subsequent works financially possible.

MASH is *Mr. Roberts* revised and updated, but not substantially improved. In

striking contrast to the movies that follow, it leaves essentially nothing to chance, programming its effects with the ruthless efficiency that one would expect from a skilled TV veteran. Oriental gongs are intermittently rung on the sound track to tell the spectator when to laugh; black-comedy interludes of blood-spurting surgery are periodically introduced to maintain a "serious" war-is-hell backdrop; and for all the apparent verisimilitude of the celebrated overlapping dialogue—controlled by an adept handling of timing and dynamics, where *lack* of inflection becomes a form of emphasis—no one in the bleachers is permitted to miss a single significant line. Too single-minded to include any serious risks in its strategies, it is unswervingly a thesis film that militates for the heady (if headless) consensus of a mob's euphoria as part of its overall message: that fun-loving, honest, proficient surgeons are much healthier and a lot easier to take than bureaucratic, militaristic hypocrites and religious fanatics.

For roughly its first twenty minutes, *MASH* amply demonstrates this audacious postulate; after that, it can only repeat its position ad infinitum over a series of tacked-on skits. When Hawkeye (Donald Sutherland) and Trapper John (Elliott Gould) leave for Japan, the structure is already buckling; by the time we reach the football match, the film has clearly been stretched to run on like a TV series (as, indeed, it subsequently has), with the Korean War at this point safely out of sight and out of mind. The sensible way of dealing with death and madness, we are good-naturedly instructed, is to forget about them, while the only way to deal with solitude is to "join the crowd" like Sally Kellerman's "Major Hot Lips" (after being subjected to a proper number of qualifying sexual humiliations) or else go mad like Major Burns (Robert Duvall)—who is sent packing early on, in a straitjacket, to make way for further horseplay.

After this sort of high-powered speciousness, *Brewster McCloud* (1970) registers as an honorable if somewhat childish failure: a species of crazed doodling with all the awkward, endearing earmarks of a promising "first" film, in which a director tries to do and say everything at once, trusting to find his coherence in the cutting room. Wildly overlapping allegory, satire, TV burlesque, social protest, demented bird lectures, and conventionally dull songs by John Phillips, the film nurtures a dream of "escape by flight" from convention that is as innocently vague as its hero's, and as predictably doomed. But along the way are some glancing pleasures that suggest some of the achievements to come: the intercut and overlapping use of René Auberjonois's bird lecture in relation to the already fragmented plot, at least until this relationship becomes overly rigid and predictable; the debut of Shelley Duvall, an Altman discovery, as a Texas-grown variant of *Breathless*'s Patricia; the bold delivery of certain oddball gags—like the instant splattering of a newspaper headline ("AGNEW: SOCIETY SHOULD DISCARD SOME U.S. PEOPLE") by a bird dropping or the appearance of a tough hard-leather

delinquent sporting a Porky Pig T-shirt—along with some looser forms of humor, such as John Schuck's likeable enactment of a conscientious, semiretarded Houston cop.

It is only after the exorcism of *Brewster*, in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, that Altman arrives at a fluent and developed style that can support his semi-improvised approach. Henceforth, even his "mistakes," like *Images*—an old Altman project predating *MASH* that was filmed after *McCabe*—will carry a technical proficiency and assurance that can support many calculated risks.

> Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: as no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. —*Tristram Shandy*, vol. 2, chap. 11

> According to me it's a collaborative art. I set a boundary line and framework, but I don't try to fill it all in. If I tried to put in the middle of it everything that was in my imagination, it would be simply that. It would be a very sterile work. So I try to fill it with things I've never seen before, things that come from other people. —Altman in a recent interview

The "open spaces" that Altman offers to his fellow craftsmen or creates for himself are obviously not identical to the ones that his films offer to audiences, but they are related nonetheless: the openness and variability of a film's conception can help to encourage an open and variable response.

Broadly speaking, shooting, editing, and sound-mixing appear to be regarded by Altman as a process of elucidation, elaboration, and discovery as much as one of execution. ("The script will indicate character and situation," he has remarked, "what I do comes on top of that.") Actors are occasionally employed without written parts, invited to "fall in with the material" and create their own roles, or encouraged to alter or expand their scripted parts during rehearsals. Rather than scout every location in advance, Altman sometimes chooses to encounter them only when he arrives with his camera crew.

Equally significant are the "open spaces" that Altman allows for during shooting and then fills at the editing or sound-mixing stage. The various announcements over the public address system in *MASH*, René Auberjonois's bird lecture in *Brewster*, and Leonard Cohen's songs in *McCabe* were all arrived at and introduced long after shooting began; and one might deduce that the use of Susannah York's children's book (*In Search of Unicorns*) in *Images*, the title tune

in *The Long Goodbye*, the radio shows in *Thieves Like Us*, and Phyllis Shotwell's songs in *California Split* were all partially determined after shooting was over. (*Only* partially, one assumes—because all four of these "independent" elements figure briefly within the actions of their respective films.)

Most often, these interventions pass from the role of a foreground commentary (mainly explicit in *Brewster* and *Thieves*; more frequently loose, approximate, and dreamy in *McCabe*, *Images*, *The Long Goodbye*, and *California Split*) to that of a background murmur whenever the scene's dialogue begins, generally regaining volume over subsequent lulls in the on-screen talk. Bridging scenes or taking up narrative slack while subtly shifting or dispersing an audience's focus, this procedure distances us somewhat from the visuals and discourages sustained identification with the characters—the reverse of the way music is used in *MASH*.

But the same technique creates an impression of overloading in much of *Thieves Like Us*, where the use of Depression radio shows as historical artifacts and ironic commentaries on the characters tends to duplicate points that are already being established by other means (such as the three bank robbers' mythical sense of their own exploits). Sometimes these editorial nudges are even extended beyond simple redundancy: in the central love scene between Bowie (Keith Carradine) and Keechie (Shelley Duvall), which the actors are clearly capable of sustaining by themselves, the unnaturalistic use of the same radio phrase three times ("Thus did Romeo and Juliet consummate their first interview by falling madly in love with each other")—which is apparently intended to punctuate the successive bouts of lovemaking and convey a mood of time suspended—merely comes across as a self-conscious tic.

In *California Split*, however, the supplementary sound material has an inventive, dynamic function in relation to the action, serving more as a lively contrapuntal counterline than as a static one-to-one gloss. In the second scene at the local poker parlor, one of Shotwell's songs begins loudly over a long shot of the card players, becomes faint and is overtaken by these players' dialogue in medium shot, and then resumes loudness over a close-up of Bill—delineating a dodgy kind of fan-dance in relation to a spectator's diverse routes into the scene. And when Charlie and Bill arrive in Reno, Shotwell's jazzy recitative-with-piano and Charlie's independent free-form rap suddenly (and gratuitously) converge on the phrase "nobody there"—a striking demonstration of the blind vicissitudes of chance (such as the curious proliferation of elephants and Barbaras), which operate throughout the film on multiple levels.

In all Altman's best films, the emotional center gravitates around a pronounced feeling of absence—a sense of opportunities lost, connections missed, kindred spirits divided and scattered—and in many respects the independent

sound material serves to embody some form of this failed utopia: a "commentary" of lyrical idealism abstractly bridging discontinuous characters.

The contrast with *MASH* is again striking; there, the solitary characters are the villains, and even Trapper John is made to appear suspicious and unwholesome until he pulls out his jar of olives and joins the snob elite. In *Brewster, McCabe*, and *The Long Goodbye*, membership in a group is generally depicted as a sign of naïveté. The fantasies spun by minor characters about Brewster and McCabe—like the remarks of Philip Marlowe's candle-dipping neighbors and Marty Augustine's entourage of faithful hoods—usually come across as the utterances of gullible, fanciful children; in *Images*, the "healthy," "public" response of Hugh (René Auberjonois) to the solitary madness of Cathryn (Susannah York) is shown to be comparably myopic.

In *Thieves Like Us* and *California Split* these relationships are less fixed and more complex: Bowie, Keechie, Chicamaw, and T-Dub in the former and Charlie and Bill in the latter oscillate restlessly between different kinds of solitude and communal living, and strained or frustrated domesticity—broken homes and temporary arrangements—is a keynote in both films. But even here the minor characters share a visible kinship with the assorted array of cranks who populate *McCabe* and *The Long Goodbye*, each riding on an autonomous wavelength that runs at an oblique angle to everyone else's. Consider, for instance, Harvey in *California Split*, an old friend whom Bill looks up in a paint store:

> **Harvey:** Wait a minute! Don't tell anybody you came, I'm getting a flash. You see, I have a good amount of ESP. I'm blessed with it—my wife kids me about it—but you should catch it when I get these flashes. Let me see how close I can get to what's goin' on here. I get—I get that you're probably back with your old lady . . . an-n-n that you probably want to paint your garage door—perhaps even the whole front of your house—I'm gettin' the color . . . it's a greenish color. Right, how close did I get?
> **Bill:** I need a loan, Harvey.
> **Harvey:** A loan?
> **Bill:** Yeah.

And that's all we ever see of Harvey. Like some of the Flemish peasants in Brueghel's landscapes and certain topics and individual chapters in *Tristram Shandy*, he emerges briefly in apparent nonrelation to his immediate surroundings but retrospectively blends into an overall pattern of awkward everyday cussedness that constitutes an appropriate setting for absurdist/humanist drama. A distant cousin of the eccentrics in Preston Sturges's gallery of grandiloquent bit

players, he is spiritually closer to Dee Mobley (Tom Skerritt) in *Thieves Like Us*, dislocating the screen door on his shack while counting the money in his hand and not quite aware of it, or Ken Samson's gate attendant in *The Long Goodbye*, impersonating Walter Brennan to a bewildered gangster.

The pathos of these characters—and countless other examples could be picked from Altman's menagerie—is directly related to the way that they momentarily take the plot away from the films' equally displaced heroes; their fumblings are only condensed versions of the clumsy, uncertain relationships of McCabe, Marlowe, the bank robbers of *Thieves*, and the gamblers of *California Split* to their respective worlds. John McCabe (Warren Beatty) cracks a raw egg into a double whisky and gulps it down to impress Constance Miller (Julie Christie), but all she cares to take note of is his "cheap jockey-club cologne"; more worldly-wise but similarly lost, she inhabits an opium pipe dream that is equally inaccessible and unknown to McCabe. Legends and "professionals" to the residents of First Presbyterian Church, they are helpless amateurs when faced with the potential challenges of each other, and in many respects the film they inhabit registers as a wistful ode to that lost potential.

Within this context, the banality of Leonard Cohen's semi-abstract songs becomes workable through its teasing relationships and nonrelationships with the action, postulating mythical archetypes that might alternately fit or collide with the characters on the screen. Because these relationships are so fluctuating and ambiguous (*Is* Constance a "travelling lady"?), we are forced to construct our own myths and antimyths out of them, situating ourselves somewhere—Altman doesn't specify a precise position—in relation to Cohen's discourse, the story's, and the characters'.

What might legitimately be regarded as a style whose accents and cadences—expressed through zooms, pans, and qualities of light and focus, along with shifting stresses on the sound track—convey a dreamy vagueness is equally a broad invitation to find one's way in it, to merge with a narrative rather than simply be carried along by it. Thus we are free to notice or not notice Constance's heart-shaped money box (and draw or not draw "significant" conclusions); and when we hear intermittent strains of "Beautiful Dreamer," they are not accompanying her opium sessions but figuring in less obvious places: screeched out on a fiddle in Sheehan's Saloon while McCabe watches her bolt down a tableful of food, and sung by her newly arrived prostitutes as they splash about in the misty bathhouse.

McCabe (muttering to himself): I tell ya, sometime—sometimes when I take a look at ya I jus, I jus keep lookin' and-a lookin'. . . . Long to feel yuh little body up against me

so bad I think I'm gonna bust. . . . I keep tryin' to tell ya, in a lotta different ways—just one time you could be sweet without no money around. . . . I think I could—well I tell ya somethin', I got poetry in me. I *do.* I got poetry in me! . . . but—I ain't gonna put it down on paper, I ain't no educated man, I got sense enough not to try . . .

—*McCabe and Mrs. Miller*

Marty Augustine (Mark Rydell) (to Marlowe): You remember the night that Jo Ann became ill and we hadda take her to the hospital. Well, as you can see, she's had extensive treatment—the finest surgeons, had nurses around the clock, best attention—because, as you know, she's very near and dear to me. And the prognosis is excellent. Excellent. She's gonna be fine. Now I left the hospital that night, and I was—I was really upset, I was—what was I?

Jo Ann (Jo Ann Brody): Haunted.

Marty: What, what?

Jo Ann (louder, more distinctly): *Haunted.*

Marty: That's it. Haunted! I was haunted—absolutely haunted by the idea that somehow I'd been unfair to her.

—*The Long Goodbye*

As can be partially discerned from the above, inarticulateness and clarity can often register as moral positions in Altman's films—at least until *California Split*, where the whole question of a moral context becomes largely suspended. In the absurdist terrains traversed by McCabe and Marlowe, a hired gun (Hugh Millais) describing how to make profits out of dead Chinamen can be a lot more articulate than the leading citizen of First Presbyterian Church, talking to himself; and a psychotic gangster (Augustine) can enunciate sentences a lot more distinctly and lucidly than Roger Wade (Sterling Hayden), a published novelist—even if the former is describing his guilt feelings after gratuitously smashing a Coke bottle across his girlfriend's face, and the latter is merely trying to communicate affection to his wife through a series of helpless stammers.

Altman's apparent preference here for his tongue-tied characters over their smooth-talking counterparts (the pompous lawyer in *McCabe*, the sinister Dr. Verringer in *Goodbye*) seems to rest on the notion that emotions speak louder than words. And the most serious reproaches that have been leveled against the director—whether for "laziness," lack of intellectual rigor, or incoherent rambling—can mainly be traced back to this bias. But on Altman's behalf, it is worth noting that rigor and clean articulation is not really what he is after: the vagaries of behavior, the indulging of certain moods, and the staging of chance encounters can be enormously expressive even without the dividends of what critics like to call "an organic whole." It is rather like censuring a jazz musician because his improvisations lack the polished form and execution of a classical musician

performing a written piece. While it is certainly true that the former is less likely to achieve a finished form, there is a different kind of excitement in the way that he tries to achieve it—a way of regarding "form" as a verb rather than a noun, a process rather than a postulate. And the baselines established by Altman for isolating and relating different kinds and degrees of coherence are anything but loose.

In Michael Tarantino's article "Movement as Metaphor," a persuasive case is made through concrete evidence that the nearly constant movement of the camera in *The Long Goodbye* affects both our relationship to the film and Marlowe's relationship to the world around him.[1] In what I hope might serve as complementary evidence of that film's formal interest (which surpasses, I believe, that of Altman's other works to date), I would like to show how roughly comparable parameters are at work on the sound track, above and beyond the overlapping dialogue—particularly in the extraordinary use of the title tune, a facet of the film that many commentators have taken to be nothing more than a trivial joke.

"The Long Goodbye" is a 32-bar standard by John T. Williams and Johnny Mercer that is performed throughout the film in countless versions, none of which is ever heard in its entirety; out of the dozen or so times that parts of it are sung on the sound track—mainly by Marlowe, Marty Augustine, and Jack Riley (a pianist in a bar) on-screen or by Jack Sheldon and Clydie King offscreen—most of the lyrics can be pieced together, and in simplest thematic terms they provide a commentary on the broken encounters that punctuate the film (and it should be noted that the personal pronouns become masculine whenever Clydie King sings the lyrics, thereby expanding their inclusiveness), beginning with Marlowe and his cat and continuing through virtually every subsequent relationship charted in the plot. As with Cohen's songs in *McCabe*, the relevance to the action is fluctuating but dynamic in relation to our responses, and the same words can suggest different things at different times. In more directly operative terms, the song functions as follows:

1. As a piano improvisation (by the Dave Grusin Trio) in the opening scene, before the actual theme is stated; as Marlowe is woken by his cat and tries to persuade the latter to eat something, he can be heard humming, singing ("Can you recognize the theme?"), and whistling various fragments, completely out of synch with the piano and in a different key.
2. Sung by Jack Sheldon as the credits come on, while Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton) drives away from the Malibu Colony (and is momentarily entertained by the gate attendant's Barbara Stanwyck imitation), in a medium-tempo, somewhat Sinatra-like version.
3. Sung by Clydie King (beginning a fresh chorus) in a slower, more moody

and lyrical version as Marlowe pulls up at a supermarket to buy cat food, her chorus continued by

4. A soupy Muzak version of soaring violins, parodying conventional Hollywood mood music, as Marlowe enters the supermarket (where he's told that he has left the car's headlights on), which is continued by

5. Sheldon's version, while Terry drives toward Marlowe's house, proceeding through the next-to-last bar of a chorus, which is completed (and a new chorus begun) by

6. The Muzak version in the supermarket (Marlowe to clerk: "You don't happen to have a cat by any chance—" Clerk: "Whadda I need a cat for? I got a girl"), continued by

7. Sheldon's version over Terry driving, which is in turn continued by

8. Grusin's piano improvisation as Marlowe returns home, again humming and singing parts of the tune—out of synch, in a different key—along with phrases of his own ("I love the cat").

Subsequent uses include (among many others) a statement of the theme by guitar and castanets over Marlowe and Terry's drive to Mexico; the first four notes sounded whenever Eileen and Roger Wade's gate bell is rung; a version by Morgan Ames's Aluminium Band continuing Clydie King's rendition during the first scene with Marty Augustine, when the music first comes over a car radio, then is made to sound as though it is coming from the house of Marlowe's hippy neighbors; back in Mexico, as a funeral dirge played by the Tapoztlan Municipal Band while Marlowe speaks to the local coroner; a loud, chaotic, and sloppy jazz version played and sung by guests at the Wades' party in Malibu (a scene of social chaos gravitating around Roger Wade, who is going to pieces emotionally); and sung with a slight Jewish lilt by Marty Augustine in his office as he waits for Marlowe to arrive.

The continuities and discontinuities that are established or implied in items 1 through 8—between Marlowe and Terry, home and supermarket, one car's trajectory and another, or one ad-lib version over another—are not merely reflections but active instruments of the divisions being set up between these discrete entities, at the same time that a common tune is binding them all together. And the spectator's relationship to the action is being further played with by the multiple shifts in the music's volume throughout most of the above examples, as melody and/or words fade in and out of the sound track in relation to the dialogue, passing from "foreground" to "background" in a manner somewhat analogous to the camera movements insofar as they repeatedly redefine our focus on and distance from the events taking place—thus continually altering and varying our grasp of them. We are required, in other words, to improvise our own "Long

Goodbye," both figuratively and literally, in order to establish our proximity to all the others.

The shifting volumes of other sound elements—the meow of Marlowe's cat, the voices of his spaced-out neighbors—are simultaneously altering our impressions of spatial depth and physical separations in these scenes, as is the sound-editing of Marlowe's police interrogation, which cuts back and forth between the tinny reverberations in the room he is being "secretly" observed from to the more full-bodied sound in the room that he occupies.

But the spatial and spiritual distances suggested above are modest indeed compared to those that accumulate in the movie's later scenes, beginning with the Wades' disastrous party. In the scenes that follow—Roger's suicide, Marty Augustine's threat to castrate Marlowe, Marlowe's frantic pursuit of a glassy-eyed Eileen Wade until he is run over, his regaining consciousness in the hospital—the sharp divisions between characters reach an intensity that suggests a rapid escalation of neurosis to schizophrenia, a state of total dissociation. This is expressed not only through a shallow sense of space in certain shots (Marlowe and Eileen rushing into the waves after Roger, Marlowe's subsequent chase after Eileen), where characters appear to be traversing enormous distances without advancing anywhere, but even further in the loud, bouncy, cheerful, and utterly autonomous jazz-piano version of the theme that accompanies Marlowe's frenzied pursuit of Eileen. When he is hit by another car, the sound suddenly dovetails into a few raucous bars near the conclusion of Sheldon's vocal version, with a trumpet blaring over the voice; this in turn is quickly overtaken by a cacophony of overlapping sirens that fade into a dead silence broken only by maniacal, distant screams from other rooms in the hospital where Marlowe wakes up.

For all its jokey overtones, the scene that ensues is decidedly the most nightmarish in the entire film. On the bed opposite Marlowe's lies a figure wrapped mummylike, from head to toe, in bandages. After coming to his senses, Marlowe cracks to his roommate, "You're gonna be okay—I seen all your pictures too" and starts to leave the room, until the figure grunts at him incoherently but insistently, beckoning him over. "Hey listen, you tell that guy that it don't hurt to die," Marlowe remarks to the virtual corpse that might as well be him—indeed, *is* him if we consider how Marlowe stalks senselessly through the remainder of the film. "Hey, that's the smallest one I've seen," he goes on, picking up the mummy's miniature harmonica. "No, listen, I can't," he explains, "I gotta tin ear." He blows a plaintive whine on the harmonica, adds, "I'll practice—see you later," and beats his retreat from the room and his dormant doppelgänger, evading a nurse with the declaration, "I'm not Mr. Marlowe, this is Mr. Marlowe here," with another distant scream of pain from another room heard over his parting words.

In this crucial scene, we have Altman's universe, themes, and formal pro-

cedures reduced to their barest expressions. And if the harmonica and Marlowe's cryptic adoption of it—he is blowing on it again in the movie's closing shot—immediately recalls the harmonica wails of Jean-Pierre Léaud in Jacques Rivette's *Out 1: Spectre* for its reduction of communication itself and the production of "meaning" to stark essentials, the relationship may not be entirely fortuitous. Rivette has recently expressed an interest in Altman's work that began with *The Long Goodbye*; and the behavioral comparisons of Juliet Berto and Dominique Labourier (or Bulle Ogier and Marie-France Pisier) in Rivette's *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* are not wholly irrelevant to those of Elliott Gould and George Segal (or Ann Prentiss and Gwen Welles) in *California Split*, however much more simplified and "protected" the Altman-conducted improvisations may be.

Central to the concept of modernism in all the arts is the idea of collaboration—the notion that artist and audience conspire to create the work in its living form, that the experience of making it is in some way coterminous (if far from identical) to the experience of hearing, seeing, or reading it.

Even at his most venturesome and experimental, Altman cannot be described as a director who pursues this notion unequivocally and consistently in the sense that Tati does in *Playtime* (through visual options) and Rivette does in *Spectre* (through interpretive options); considering the fairly constant way he has remained active in the commercial cinema since *MASH* in 1969—and all the conditions that this fact implies—he cannot really be considered in the same league at all. But virtually alone among his peers, he has opened up the American illusionist cinema to a few of the *possibilities* inherent in this sort of game—played for limited stakes in controlled situations, but played nonetheless.

—*Sight and Sound* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1975)

Afterword: *Nashville*

"A dialectic collage of unreality," remarked pop singer Brenda Lee, emerging from the Nashville premiere in August. After a summer full of humorless rhetoric in the American press about "the true lesson of Watergate," "the failure of our civilization," "the long nauseating terror of a fall through the existential void," and equally grave matters—most of it implying that a movie has to be about "everything" (i.e., the State of the Union) before it can be about anything—it was refreshing to discover that someone, at long last, had finally got it right. Even if Lee's comment was intended as a slam, it deserves to be resurrected as a tribute. For if *Nashville* is conceivably the most exciting commercial American movie in years, this is first of all because of what it constructs, not what it exposes.

From the moment we begin with an ad for the film itself—a blaring overload of multimedia confusion—and pass to a political campaign van spouting banalities, then

to a recording studio where country music star Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) is cutting a hilariously glib bicentennial anthem, *Nashville* registers as a double-fisted satire of its chosen terrain, and it would be wrong to suggest that its targets of derision are beside the point, even if the angle of vision subsequently widens to take in more than just foolishness. But a rich "dialectic collage" of contradictory attitudes and diverse realities is what brings the film so vibrantly to life, and to launch moralistic rockets on such a shifting base is to miss its achievement entirely. In point of fact, the film celebrates as much as it ridicules—often doing both at the same time—while giving both its brilliant cast and its audience too much elbowroom to allow for any overriding thesis.

Robert Altman and his collaborators have built a narrative out of many superimposed parts, and it is worth looking at some of their procedures. Joan Tewkesbury wrote her blueprint/script after spending only five days in the Tennessee capital, apparently guided mainly by Altman's request that its country music milieu be linked comparatively to politics and that an assassination figure at the end. Actors were given the choice of following her dialogue or substituting their own, and many were invited to compose their own songs (usually with Richard Baskin) under the (questionable) assumption that country music, like politics, is potentially anyone's game. Similarly, Thomas Hal Phillips was given the job of launching a presidential primary campaign—the film is set in 1976, the year of the U.S. Bicentennial—for an invisible fictional candidate named Hal Phillips Walker, complete with local headquarters and a Replacement Party platform to be heard from a van, prowling the streets ignored like a ghostly proxy. Finally, the sound system inaugurated on *California Split*—a set-up using many on- and off-screen microphones whose volume levels can be altered during the sound-mixing stage—enabled Altman to extend his principles of improvisation further, beyond the parameters of the camera's range.

A great deal was shot—two hours of rushes were reportedly screened every day—and at one stage Altman considered releasing two mammoth films, each of which would cover the same time span while concentrating on twelve different characters. That he settled on a more conventional solution and concludes the film with a veritable surplus of Significance after over 150 minutes of open sailing is of course commensurate with the querulous sociological responses. But prior to this capitulation he engenders his most adventurous structure to date, deftly juggling his cast of two dozen characters with the assurance of a master storyteller while simultaneously demanding (and rewarding) an unusual amount of alertness and participation from the spectator.

Quite simply because he has *reinvented* Nashville rather than discovered it, even the most spontaneous and wayward elements in his SF fantasy remain firmly within his grasp. Starting with the campaign van, Hamilton with his mistress (Barbara Baxley) and son (Dave Peel) and musicians, an English groupie interviewer named Opal (Geraldine Chaplin), a black gospel group with white lead singer Linnea (Lily Tomlin)—and leaving it partially up to the viewer to decide on the relative importance of each, to discriminate between characters and extras (a task not unlike that faced by most of the film's inhabitants)—Altman proceeds to shuffle these miniplots while casually adding fourteen characters more, as everyone but Opal and Linnea appears or reappears at the airport; then deals them out in orderly succession as they leave the parking lot, finally

assuming a recognizable narrative shape; and scrambles most of them again when they become caught in a freakish highway pileup, to be joined by Linnea, Opal, and others.

One proceeds through this constant play between organization and chaos as though in a mystery, picking out threads that may be either loose ends or clues to future events—an aspect that makes *Nashville* well worth repeated visits. Cutting between the fatuous affirmations of Hamilton's song ("We must be doin' somethin' right to last two hundred years") and the more unbridled ones of the gospel group establishes one kind of contrast, but when Opal starts prattling over the sound of the latter about "darkest Africa" and "naked frenzied bodies," our attention and response become further subdivided. Similarly, when she is holding forth about American violence during the traffic jam, what's funny isn't merely the delivery of her hysterical clichés in medium shot and screen center, but the relationship between that and the sheer irrelevancy of a little boy outside the car in left foreground, simultaneously consuming an ice cream cone like a detail out of Tati or Brueghel.

With the recurring juxtapositions of performers with spectators, insiders (Timothy Brown, Allan Nicholls, Cristina Raines) with outsiders (Robert Doqui, David Hayward, Bert Remsen), contrasts between public and private behavior frequently come to the fore—epitomized by Connie White (Karen Black) trying on a variety of smiles while waiting to appear on the Opryland stage—and deceptions involving telephones become a minor leitmotif. If Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley) is the only character who seems incapable of such duplicity, this may not be unrelated to her climactic "breakdown" during a concert, which hinges on a lack of separation between private and public identities. Clearly the most professional of the singers, whose songs are least mediated by any sort of irony in their presentation, she is also the one who abandons herself most nakedly in her performances.

That she turns out to be the assassin's target seems to square with Altman's sense of cosmic injustice—formerly evidenced by the death of the hero in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the Coke bottle victim in *The Long Goodbye*, and equally present here in the sudden irrelevant speech of Pfc. Kelly (Scott Glenn) to Mr. Green (Keenan Wynn) just after the latter has learned of his wife's death. Cruelly twisting the screw, Altman cuts from his strangled sobs to the laughter of Opal and Triplette (Michael Murphy) in another scene, as if to underline the isolation of his grief. And to compound the sense of absurdity, it is Green's angry departure from his wife's funeral in search of his groupie niece (Shelley Duvall) that indirectly causes the assassination to take place.

Some characters—Duvall, David Arkin's chauffeur, Jeff Goldblum's magician—are static figures to be brought on like running gags; Opal and Tom (Keith Carradine) are more diversified versions of the same principle. But others are subject to development, elucidation, and modification, either in their behavior or in the way they are presented. Linnea, whom we learn to identify with humane impulses, is briefly seen at Hamilton's party describing the results of various traffic injuries with apparent relish; Hamilton's son, bashful and courteous at the same party, becomes a drunken lout at the fund-raising campaign smoker where Sueleen (Gwen Welles) does a striptease, while Sueleen herself shifts during this scene from a comic character to a tragic one. And after driving Sueleen home, Linnea's cuckolded husband (Ned Beatty) suddenly launches a clumsy seduction attempt of his own.

Alongside these uncertainties about characters are ambiguities involving events. The film offers evidence but no proof about which of Tom's four ladies he dedicates his new song to; and we may wonder whether Barbara Jean's behavior at her concert actually constitutes a breakdown—or if it does, whether this is partially provoked by her husband (Allen Garfield) forcing her off the stage. We don't know if she dies after being shot at the political rally or why, indeed, she is shot at all.

Does Opal work for the BBC? She repeatedly claims she does, and most reviewers have followed her lead, often going on to criticize the part in those terms. But if Opal's scene with Triplette had included more of the original footage, in which she admits that she doesn't work for the BBC, her character would have been assigned another label, and in each subsequent scene would have registered differently. Multiplying this detail by twenty-four, one easily sees why the film should have been much longer, and how extensively our chancy and partial experience of it is a response to *work in progress*—the unfolding of a narrative complex rather than its ultimate destination. Thus, to stop the movie at a precise meaning—and, worse yet, a sociopolitical one—is to rob it of its complexity and consign it to the same dustbin of platitudes that Opal and Hal Phillips Walker both specialize in accumulating.

Not that Altman is entirely blameless in eliciting such a misplaced impulse. *Nashville* begins with a crowd of actors-as-extras—inviting us to ramble like tourists over the busy landscape, picking our own points of entry, our mixtures and degrees of interest—and ends with a crowd of extras-as-documentary-subjects, obliging us to accept them as emblems of some higher order, with the Nashville Parthenon and three screen-filling shots of the American flag to point the way. The camera zooms back to take in the entire spectacle of crowd, edifice, and flag, yet the effect is constricting rather than expansive—a world of diverse possibilities shrunk to the dimensions of a Statement. Then another, recorded version of "It Don't Worry Me," the emblematic theme song with which Barbara Harris's aspiring singer has lulled the crowd and forged her own unexpected ascendancy, is heard over the final credits, neatly balancing the film's hard-sell introduction, which also suggested the abstracting of a complex into a commodity. Acknowledging itself as a piece of merchandise, complete with packaging, price tag, and succinct catalogue description, *Nashville* leaps from its exciting and individual state of grace—the open process of its initial making, and the better part of its unraveling—into the limited vocabulary and closed circuits of a public forum.[2]

—*Sight and Sound* 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1975)

NOTES

1. Michael Tarantino, "Movement as Metaphor: *The Long Goodbye*," published in the same issue of *Sight and Sound* (44, no. 2 [Spring 1975]: 98–102).

2. Much of the tenor and form of this piece undoubtedly stemmed from two factors that may be worth stressing: it was written in London, where I was witnessing other American responses from afar, and I was determined to mention all twenty-four of the main actors in the review. [2002]

Mixed Emotions

Breaking the Waves

Ever since I first encountered Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* in Cannes, where it won the grand jury prize, I've been debating within myself about it, because I find it simultaneously shameless, boldly original, contrived, highly affecting, transparent, cynical, hopeful, ironic, sincere, ugly, beautiful, and downright baffling. In a way, my debate isn't so different from that of Bess (Emily Watson)—the innocent and high-strung (or unstrung) young heroine who lives on the northwest coast of Scotland in the early 70s and for much of the film carries on a furious internal debate with "God," speaking her own part in a squeaky high voice and God's in a patriarchal low one.

Where Bess, a devout believer, has God, I, a nonbeliever, have the late Carl Dreyer, the film artist both von Trier and I revere above all others. And where Bess speaks to herself not as God but as her sense of God (which overlaps on rare occasion with her sense of her husband, Jan), I speak to myself not as Dreyer but as my sense of Dreyer's achievement (which overlaps on rare occasions with my sense of von Trier's achievement).

Considering how rarely Dreyer's films are shown these days, bringing him up may seem more than a little esoteric. But Dreyer's work has direct bearing on many basic issues raised by *Breaking the Waves*—about film, about religion, and about the whole notion of "good works," in both ethical and aesthetic terms. Even who Dreyer was plays a significant role. Look him up in the standard American reference work, Ephraim Katz's *The Film Encyclopedia*, and you read, "He was brought up by a strict Lutheran family." But read the only comprehensive Dreyer biography, by Maurice Drouzy (unpublished in English, though available in Danish and French), and you discover this is completely false. Ib Monty, director of the Danish Film Archives, knew Dreyer pretty well, and he once told me that Dreyer wasn't especially religious, even though some of his best-known features (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *Day of Wrath*, *Ordet*) address religious issues. (Von Trier, a Dane and self-styled Dreyer disciple, describes himself as a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, but it's questionable whether this has as much bearing on his work as Dreyer's beliefs had on his.)

Because Dreyer never established himself commercially during the sound period, his output from the 30s on was minuscule—roughly one feature per

decade—though his influence continues to be enormous, even when it's subterranean. (It's doubtful, for example, that Arthur Miller would have written *The Crucible* if *Day of Wrath* hadn't been released in the U.S. five years earlier; and the camera angles in the recent movie of the play bear some unmistakable suggestions of Dreyer's influence.) Von Trier, who hit the world market a dozen years ago with *The Element of Crime*, has been much more successful (if much less influential): he's also made *Epidemic* (1987); *Medea*, based on an unfilmed Dreyer script (1988); *Zentropa* (1991); the enormously successful Danish miniseries *The Kingdom* (1994; a second cycle of episodes is now being filmed); and *Breaking the Waves*.

Part of what's least Dreyer-like about *Breaking the Waves* is von Trier's calculated and postmodernist sense of film reference. Yet the film's intensity, and therefore its power, is related to its models. In an interview Emily Watson mentions von Trier asking her to study Renée Falconetti in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and Giulietta Masina in Fellini's *La strada* (1954). The grotesque incompatibility of these two models of innocent female suffering—Falconetti's raw, carnal martyrdom and Masina's hammy, pop-eyed Harry Langdon imitations—suggests a lack of true respect for either Dreyer or Fellini. But traces of these films are indeed visible in Watson's performance, so perhaps this dismissal is too hasty. And much as I hate to admit it, my conflicted response to von Trier's film, my simultaneous desire to denounce and embrace it, is similar to my initial responses to *Day of Wrath* and *Ordet* when I was a teenager. Nonetheless, the cynicism and shameless crudity of von Trier's plot and dramaturgy make it impossible to consider him seriously alongside Dreyer. (Just as von Trier gets Watson to conflate Falconetti and Masina, he himself conflates Dreyer and Douglas Sirk—a cynical soap-opera specialist in Germany and Hollywood who distanced himself from his pile-driver effects with layers and layers of irony—or, perhaps even closer to the mark, Sirk's sadistic postmodernist disciple of the 70s, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who gets even more mileage out of photogenic suffering.)

In short, *Breaking the Waves* aggravates and perplexes me, proposing a critical conundrum that, I reluctantly confess, can only grow out of something new and interesting. Five years ago *Zentropa* struck me as a technical tour de force that was emotionally hollow—unlike *Medea*, which does powerful things with its actors and landscapes (even if it plays havoc with Dreyer's script and might just as well have gone back to Euripides). Part of me would like to say that the achievement of *Breaking the Waves* is that for long stretches it doesn't seem emotionally hollow—that it's a very clever con game, a faux-naif masterpiece (unless one rejects the category as a contradiction in terms).

The film unravels in two diametrically opposed camera and editing styles—neither of which has any obvious relation to Dreyer, but that together create a

dialectic that is clearly Dreyeresque, above all in combining narrative and nonnarrative modes of perception. Though the style carrying the narrative may seem more important than the style carrying the meditative, nonnarrative landscape shots behind eight successive "chapter headings," the two are equally important to what the film is doing as a whole. (Indeed, their juxtaposition is so dramatic that it's easy to remember the landscape shots being much longer than they actually are.)

The aggressive "narrative" camera style consists of improvised, dizzying handheld movements executed by Robby Müller (a Dutch cinematographer best known for his work with Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch) and broken up by repeated jarring jump cuts that are like a needle skipping across a record. The color of the super-35-millimeter 'Scope footage has been partially bleached out from having been transferred to video and then back to film.

By contrast, the "nonnarrative" camera style consists of panoramic shots of locations that have been digitally "painted" to achieve high resolution and vivid colors. Each of these shots runs about a minute and is accompanied by portions of a pop record of the early 70s and by a chapter number and title ("Chapter Two," for instance, is "Life with Jan"); the camera remains stationary, but at least one element in each landscape—usually water or fog, occasionally light—is in flux. Broadly speaking, the narrative style carries a rhetoric closely associated with raw documentary, while the nonnarrative style, at once kitschy and beautiful, calls to mind picture postcards and lava lamps with panoramic shades. (Camera movement, stasis, and abrupt cuts are all central elements in Dreyer's art, but his use of them is radically different in both meaning and effect; von Trier's jazzier techniques come across like postmodernist pastiches. There's no equivalent in *Breaking the Waves,* for instance, of the technique Dreyer invented of having the camera pan and track in different directions at the same time.)

There are many ways of describing the dialectical relation between these narrative and nonnarrative styles. (The narrative style also contains a dialectic all its own—between the freedom of the shooting style and the brutal interruptions and curtailments of the editing. The shooting style suggests unfettered desire, the editing compulsive behavior—which together express the film's ambiguity about Bess's state of mind.) If the narrative style is about action and passion, the nonnarrative style is about meditation, about action and emotion recollected in tranquility.

Von Trier has described the nonnarrative interludes as a "God's-eye view of the landscape in which this story is unfolding, as if He is watching over the characters." This may describe the film's final shot, but the landscapes behind the chapter headings are obviously linked to the consciousness of Bess—unless von Trier means to imply that God's taste and innocence are somehow equivalent to

hers. But judging from his other comments about the story—such as "There are no bad guys, only misunderstandings," which overlooks a good deal of gratuitous cruelty on the part of the villagers and outright savagery on the part of a sailor played by Udo Kier—he's often as confused about what he's doing as Bess is about what she's doing.

"Can you think of anything the outsiders have brought with them?" one of the stern church fathers asks Bess at the beginning of the film, a reference to visiting oil riggers. She replies, "Their music." A moment later, outside the church, she smiles directly at the camera, and we see the first chapter heading and hear the first pop song ("Bess Gets Married" and "All the Way from Memphis"). Jan, the oil rigger she falls in love with, is played by a Swedish actor (Stellan Skarsgard), but he seems meant to be taken as an American, like most of his coworkers; in some respects Bess's bond with him can be taken as an allegorical version of von Trier's hankering after Hollywood, roughly akin to the role Harvey Keitel played for Jane Campion (and Holly Hunter) in *The Piano*. (Though the dialogue of *Breaking the Waves* is in English—as it was in *The Element of Crime*—the shooting was done in Denmark and Scotland. The original story was set in a fishing community on Denmark's west coast, where a strict puritan sect known as the Inner Mission—a sect that plays an important role in Dreyer's *Ordet*—rules; when von Trier decided to shift his story to Scotland, the Free Church was substituted.) However, Bess smiling directly at the camera is an early indication of von Trier's ironic distance from his material, which places him at a further remove from Hollywood.

Bess's obsessive infatuation with Jan—which makes most of the villagers conclude she's not quite right in the head and increases their disapproval when she marries him—is exacerbated when he goes back to work on the rig. She prays for his early return, finding life without him unbearable. When a serious accident paralyzes him from the neck down, ensuring his immediate return, she becomes convinced that her prayers were responsible. He is guilt-stricken by her continuing devotion and tries to persuade her to take a lover. She recoils in rage, but he gradually persuades her that if she has sex with other men and tells him about her experiences it will keep him alive. I won't try to synopsize the remainder of the plot, which turns progressively more extreme and melodramatic, except to say that it concludes with a tragedy followed by a pair of miracles directly inspired (albeit crudely) by the conclusion of *Ordet*.

The crucial difference between this film's conclusion and that one's is that Dreyer's—which takes a position regarding content that has radical formal impli-

cations—characteristically poses a challenge to religious belief and disbelief alike. Von Trier's no less characteristically heaps on so many layers of postmodernist irony about truth and faith that isolating any form of belief or disbelief from the resulting tangle becomes impossible: style becomes almost everything, content next to nothing. I assume this is at least partly what *New City*'s Ray Pride had in mind when he concluded, "Perhaps only a cynic like von Trier could make a film so unabashedly, so heroically heartfelt." Von Trier is certainly honest about his dishonesty. Like other postmodernists, he's merely working with what he has.

I'm far from sharing von Trier's cynicism, but I think there are many reasons for respecting it, most of them generational. People born before 1950 often had good reason to feel hopeful, at least during the late 60s and 70s; those born later—von Trier was born in 1956—had less and less reason to feel that way. A massive backlash against the earlier generation's optimism is still going on, an indication of how potent the optimism was. (Evidence of the backlash could be seen in this year's political campaigns, in which "liberal" was still a dirty word.) Within such a context, a passionate desire to create and even respect a character like Bess—however many stylistic and thematic paradoxes this entails—is clearly a heroic aspiration.

Von Trier may be deeply cynical, but he's less so than Terrence Rafferty was when he recently wrote in the *New Yorker*, "If *Breaking the Waves* becomes a hit, von Trier will have proved that the American audience for foreign films wants today precisely what it wanted in the boom years of the 50s and early 60s: nudity plus theology." A little later he added, "It's tempting to attribute the decline of the European film to the increase, over the years, in the erotic explicitness of American movies." When he says "decline" and "the European film" it can only be in the context of the American marketplace—specifically the European films selected by American distributors, the tip of the iceberg Rafferty seems happy to accept as the whole. Apparently he believes the only reason films are made in Europe is to satisfy Americans who want to see tits and ass mixed in with their theology, and if these needs can't be met, European filmmakers might as well hand over their assignments to "pure" American artists working free of such pressures (say, Brian De Palma in *Mission: Impossible*, a recent Rafferty favorite).

I can't recall much nudity or theology in European movies such as *Mon oncle*, *Breathless*, *The 400 Blows*, *Jules and Jim*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Eclipse*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, or *The Magician*—to cite only a few of my favorites that did well during those "boom years" (alongside such commercial flops as *Pickpocket*, *Lola*, and Dreyer's *Gertrud*). So I guess if American viewers are the nincompoops

Rafferty assumes, they must have had other dumb reasons for going to these films. (One important factor may have been the proliferation of independent art theaters during that era, when antitrust laws were still being enforced.)

So far *Breaking the Waves* hasn't become a hit, at least not in this country, but there are still other dumb reasons to see it, including the performances; Katrin Cartlidge as Bess's devoted sister-in-law, a part virtually antithetical to her role in *Naked*, is almost as good as Watson. There's also the gripping story, the two camera and editing styles and their relation to each other, and even the implications of a postmodernist manifesto about the possibilities of truth and sincerity for someone of von Trier's generation. Finally there's the fact that no other movie around is even remotely like it.

I can certainly understand Rafferty's anger at the sarcasm and falsity underlying von Trier's approach—since I become angry every time I think of *Breaking the Waves* "replacing" *Ordet* (though that's surely a false syllogism). But it's worth pointing out that von Trier is willing to test and challenge his own sarcasm, not merely cling to it like a life raft. In an interview with Stig Björkman in the *Village Voice* he describes how his collaboration with painter Per Kirkeby on the chapter-heading panoramas altered his view of their function in the film: "I wanted, above all, for him to find different expressions for the Romantic landscape. I was of the opinion that this Romanticism would expose a greater banality, but Kirkeby's first suggestion distanced itself quite considerably from that view. The final result could perhaps be described as a diplomatic mix of his and my ideas."

A less sympathetic reading of this flexibility might be that von Trier is "too cynical to believe even his own cynicism"—as Andrew Sarris once said of Billy Wilder. But I would prefer to regard *Breaking the Waves* as a search for belief that acknowledges the land mines separating a 70s consciousness from that goal, a search that burrows ever deeper into irony and ambiguity without reaching the sincerity it strives for—but without collapsing into the nihilism that I see all around me in commercial fare (and even stylish variants of that fare, such as *Mission: Impossible*).

Is *Breaking the Waves* a religious film? I doubt that von Trier knows the answer to that question—just as I doubt that Dreyer would have known the answer if he'd been asked the same question about *Ordet*. A vast universe of thought, feeling, and artistry divides the two films, made over forty years apart, but this uncertainty is the point at which both of them become interesting.

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Fast, Cheap & Out of Control

> To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little: to suggest . . . that is the dream.
>
> —Stéphane Mallarmé

If narratives are arrangements of incidents with precise beginnings, middles, and ends, then Errol Morris's exciting and singular *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* doesn't really qualify. You can't even call it a documentary in any ordinary sense, because you often can't say exactly what's being documented. I suspect that poetry offers a better model for what Morris is up to, particularly Mallarmé's idea of what poetry should be: an obscure object shaped and defined in successive increments by the reader's perception and imagination.

Four men are interviewed separately in Morris's film—a lion tamer (Dave Hoover), a topiary gardener (George Mendonca), a mole-rat specialist (Ray Mendez), and a robot scientist (Rodney Brooks)—and they recount the origins as well as some of the development of their passion for their work. Who they are apart from their work almost never comes up. We do learn early on that Mendonca married his employer three years after he met her and that Hoover had a fleeting friendship with circus lion tamer and 30s film star Clyde Beatty, his role model, but these are the only instances in which other characters impinge on the professional concerns of these men. Even Morris as interviewer allows his own voice to be heard only once—when he asks Hoover toward the end, "Do you miss Clyde Beatty?" Some of the footage that accompanies the talk is conventionally illustrative—showing us lion taming, topiary gardening, mole rats, and robots. Some of it is more associative—showing us circus performers, a cavorting bug in an animated cartoon, and old movie serials featuring Beatty, a robot, predatory winged creatures, and toppling buildings. What begins as a specific illustration of something one of the four men is saying sometimes mutates into something else entirely, and what begins as a nonspecific illustration of what one man is saying sometimes winds up illustrating much more precisely what another man says just afterward. Many of the passages of black-and-white "found" footage from the serials begin to seem like a kind of dream material relating to the past and to the imaginations of the four men, who are usually shown talking in color. But

the contemporary black-and-white footage of circus performers, topiary gardens, mole rats, and robots makes it impossible to mark the points at which "fact" gives way to "fiction" and life gives way to reflection.

The commingling of all these diverse materials may add up to a narrative of some kind—perhaps even one with a beginning, a middle, and an end (which would support the comparison some critics have been making with D. W. Griffith's 1916 epic *Intolerance*, another film that alternates between four stories). But defining this movie as a narrative forces us to ask: a narrative about what? If instead we decide to define it as a poem, we can ask a better question: what does it do, and how does it do it?

Rightly or wrongly, most of Morris's previous nonfiction films—*Gates of Heaven* (1978), *Vernon, Florida* (1981), and *A Brief History of Time* (1992)—have gained him the reputation of being something of a geek collector, or at the very least a filmmaker who cultivates eccentrics. (*The Thin Blue Line*, from 1988, doesn't quite fit this pattern, and I haven't seen his 1991 fiction feature, *The Dark Wind*.) The overall thrust of these three films has a lot to do with either the strangeness of the people he's filming or the strangeness he produces by filming them. Indeed, Morris's edge as a filmmaker—what might be described as his gift and his magic if one likes what he's doing, his evasiveness and his condescension toward his material if one doesn't—stems in part from the fact that we can't always be sure how much of this strangeness is a matter of content.

The new film's title derives from a statement by Brooks, the robot scientist, about the kind of small robots he'd like to see invading the solar system—"fast, cheap, and out of control." Those words might also apply to Morris's film, which moves briskly, was cheap to make, and is out of control insofar as it qualifies as an "open" text—a do-it-yourself (or glue-it-yourself) kit that obliges each viewer to synthesize his or her own meanings out of the crisscrossing discourses provided by the four interviewees and all the supplementary materials. Indeed, one of the fascinations of this film is the way in which taming lions, topiary gardening, studying mole rats, and designing robots function as metaphors for Morris's own activity as a filmmaker.

To call *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* an open text doesn't mean that Morris isn't in firm control of the form of his work; indeed, a successful open work, in contrast to a merely sloppy or random one, has enough formal rigor to limit a viewer's choices, not simply to allow a chaotic free-for-all where any and every meaning is possible. In this film the relationships between the four men being interviewed—some of them highlighted by formal means such as juxtapositions or overlaps of sound or image—aren't simply spoon-fed to us but are allowed to

emerge from the material in different configurations, according to how we read the sounds and images in relation to one another.

Case in point: Before the interviewees are identified, even before the credits, the film shows us grainy, hallucinatory black-and-white glimpses of (1) tiny robots moving awkwardly across a landscape, (2) someone in a skeleton suit chasing a clown (in both rapid and slow motion) around the periphery of a circus arena, (3) two reptiles (or are they mole rats?) fighting on a rocky surface, (4) an old gardener walking through a topiary garden, (5) a close-up of a sunflower, and (6) a lion terrorizing African natives until a boy with a spear chases the animal away. The last segment—apparently drawn from a Clyde Beatty serial, either *The Lost Jungle* (1934) or *Darkest Africa* (1936)—continues after Beatty appears, with dialogue about a missionary who disappeared in the jungle several years before and a legendary lost city. Only after all of this do we get our first color shots, identifying the Clyde Beatty circus in the present, followed by the beginning of the credits, then another shot from a black-and-white Beatty serial, and finally color footage of Hoover, the wild-animal trainer, saying that as a kid he wanted to be Beatty.

I've arbitrarily put this prefatory black-and-white material into six categories. But most of these segments consist of more than one shot, and the separations between the segments aren't always clear-cut; we might read the close-up of the sunflower, for example, as a detail in the topiary garden, which appears in the preceding shot, or as an establishing shot for Africa in the sequence with the lion that follows. And thanks to the dreamlike stylistic unity provided by the same grainy black-and-white textures in the first five of these segments (followed by the more conventional black and white of the clip from the Beatty serial), as well as the unity provided by Caleb Sampson's highly effective score (which plays a major role in structuring the entire film), most of the actions seem to be taking place on roughly the same terrain: even if the vegetation glimpsed in the robot footage clearly doesn't belong inside the circus tent, it could easily be imagined adjacent to where the reptiles or rats are fighting, which could also be read as Africa—a connection we might make semiconsciously before we encounter either the African lion or Ray Mendez, the mole-rat specialist, telling us that mole rats come from Africa. In other words, our ordinary viewing habits, which are dependent on narrative linkage between shots, impose various kinds of continuity on these opening segments, placing them in the same world—literally or figuratively in the same space, poetically within the same universe—before we even meet the four men who explicate these images.

About eight and a half minutes into the film, after we've been introduced briefly to all four of the interviewees, Brooks, the robot scientist, recounts some of his experiences with robots at MIT. As he talks, there's a matching cut from a

robot moving across a landscape to Beatty and the African boy moving across an African landscape, presumably toward the "lost city." It's a moment that poetically "confirms" the narrative continuity we've already intuitively imposed during the film's prologue, and it lays the groundwork for a system of rhymes that increasingly take on thematic properties as the four men speak about their separate professional concerns.

It's largely up to the viewer which of these thematic rhymes becomes most prominent, because the film gives us plenty to choose from, among them death, predatory combat, theatricality, coordination and its absence (such as the circus performers versus the robots), deductive reasoning and its absence (the lion tamer versus the lion, Mendez and Brooks versus their objects of study), and the struggle to control nature (a concern of all four men).

Morris's principal role as ringmaster in this poetic enterprise is to establish the way the four main discourses make a kind of music, separately as well as collectively. Each discourse is set mainly to a different rhythm and tempo: much of the Mendonca footage moves in stately and elegiac slow motion; the Mendez footage usually moves in a frenetic scherzo. Brooks's lumbering, stumbling robots define a kind of broken rhythm, while Hoover inside the lion cage often alternates between staccato flurries of movement and nervously guarded stasis. Setting these rhythms and tempi against one another, Morris invites viewers to join in with their own musical agendas, to trace their own perceptions over the choices offered. The beauty of this measured but collaborative activity is that it yields melody, not cacophony. No two viewers' melodies are likely to be the same—which is why I've been avoiding the temptation to privilege mine here—but the shapeliness of the film ensures that all of the possible melodies can be sung together.

—*Chicago Reader*, November 14, 1997

The Sweet Cheat

Time Regained

> [A few years ago], I refused to direct *Remembrance of Things Past*. I wrote to the woman producer [Nicole Stéphane] that no real filmmaker would allow himself to squeeze the madeleine as though it were a lemon and in my opinion only a film butcher would have the nerve to put Proust through the mincer.
>
> A few weeks later she obtained the agreement of the Verdurin salon, that is to say, René Clement. Come to think of it, is Proust burning in [the book-burning fires of my film] *Fahrenheit 451*? No, but this omission will soon be corrected.
>
> —François Truffaut, "The Journal of *Fahrenheit 451*" (1966)

I read *Remembrance of Things Past* all the way through more than thirty-five years ago, shortly before Truffaut registered his scorn about the very notion of a film version (Stéphane eventually got the film made in 1984—Volker Schlöndorff's dispensable *Swann in Love*). Yet I still remember my encounter with Proust as sharply as if I'd been visiting a foreign country for the first time. It was a complex engagement that made me wiser, because, as Alain de Botton recently demonstrated in *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, *Remembrance of Things Past* is the ultimate self-help book, bristling with useful advice and information. It also made me more foolish, because Proust's neurotic fixations about falling in love and its attendant agonies were so convincing that I probably exaggerated my own when I fell in love for the first time soon afterward.

I read the novel during an extended college break, averaging about a hundred pages a day, with Edmund Wilson's wonderful Proust chapter in *Axel's Castle* as my principal guide. Not stretching my reading of the novel over several months undoubtedly enhanced the experience, because Proust's strategically plotted surprises about his characters, in which people often turn out to be much different from what we suppose, are bound to be less dramatic if we have enough time to forget our first impressions.

In total, I must have spent the equivalent of two days reading. Raúl Ruiz's *Time Regained*—a brilliant and original 165-minute adaptation playing this week at the Music Box—sensibly tries to limit itself to the last of the novel's seven sections, *Le temps retrouvé*, referring back to material in previous parts only when necessary. Yet anyone who approaches *Time Regained* thinking it might capture the essence

of the greatest novel of the twentieth century in roughly one-seventeenth the time it took me to read it is indulging in an orgy of self-deception. I couldn't recommend the film to anybody in search of such a digest or as any sort of replacement for the original. For starters, most of the surprises about characters are reduced to footnotes rather than incorporated into the main text. For better and for worse, Ruiz's version is closer to a game than an adventure—not so much a lesson about life as an elaborate piece of playfulness.

Ruiz, I should add, is a friend, and one thing that's made me skeptical about his project from the outset—it became an obsession of his years ago—is that compromises of various kinds were virtually inscribed in its conception. The desire to make a star-studded blockbuster has always seemed a bit contrary to his nature and his talent for throwaway invention. Only last month he admitted to me that he had had to cut about forty-five minutes prior to the film's 1999 Cannes premiere—two-thirds of which he accepted without qualm, one-third of which he regretted because it made the film more difficult to follow (he especially regretted the loss of some material relating to the character of Morel). He originally hoped to cast, among others, Michel Piccoli as Charlus and Bernadette Lafont as Françoise, and when at one stage executives tried to impose Gérard Depardieu as Charlus—blockbuster thinking with a vengeance—he told me that under such conditions he'd rather not make the movie at all.

Back in the 60s, my own ideal casting for Charlus was Peter Sellers, who'd recently starred in Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*, and despite the resourcefulness of John Malkovich in the part, dubbed on occasion by someone else, I miss the comic extravagance of Proust's character as well as the comic violence sometimes associated with him. The same applies to Marie-France Pisier's otherwise highly resourceful Madame Verdurin. I'm reminded of Edmund Wilson's invocation of Dickens in relation to these two characters, in particular "Mme. Verdurin's dislocating her jaw through laughing at one of Cottard's jokes" and "the furious smashing by the narrator of Charlus's hat and the latter's calm substitution of another hat in its place." Generally, imperfect casting and the need to prune the text cause virtually all of Proust's characters to lose some of their richness. (One minor piece of casting is a sly joke—Alain Robbe-Grillet as Goncourt.)

Ruiz, who only recently started exploring the possibility of becoming a French citizen, remains a footloose Chilean intellectual. His oeuvre has been achieved largely through taking on absurdly grandiose challenges—first to make one hundred films (a goal he achieved years ago, at least if videos count as films), then to make more films and/or videos than all other Chilean filmmakers combined. He has obviously taken on Proust as one more macho dare, and even if he's met the challenge with more ingenuity and wit than one might have thought possible, one can still question whether it was ever worth thinking about. (Admittedly,

Eisenstein dreamed of doing Marx's *Das Kapital*, yet that film project never went beyond a few pages of notes, which surely protects its glamour as High Concept.) Ruiz has never been much of a hustler, so it shouldn't be too surprising that what I regard as his greatest work—his 1985 Portuguese miniseries, *Manuel on the Isle of Wonders*, which is only fifteen minutes shorter than *Time Regained*—is perhaps the one that's hardest to see (to the best of my knowledge it survives only at the Portuguese Cinémathèque, and in a French-dubbed version that showed with English subtitles on Australian television many years ago), whereas some of his movies that have had the widest American exposure—*The Golden Boat* (1989) and more recently *Shattered Image* (1997)—are among his least accomplished and interesting.

Even if it lacks the emotional power of *Manuel*, *Time Regained* is a lot closer to Ruiz's best work than it is to his worst. Yet apart from the personal challenge it represented, I'm not convinced that it's a film that anyone had to make. It will undoubtedly encourage some people to read or reread the book, but it will also provide many others an excuse for never reading it at all. In any case, is it possible to separate its praiseworthy value from its value as a glossy, high-priced cultural object—the sort of position awarded most Merchant-Ivory productions and comparable upscale consumerist literary adaptations such as *The Wings of the Dove*? The argument that Ruiz manages to subvert the interior-decoration syndrome represented by these movies is undermined by the fact that it caters to essentially the same crowd, sometimes even in the same way. (A good example of Ruiz exploiting this syndrome with some charm—emblematic of the film's overall flair for selecting pungent period details—is a passing allusion to the Théâtrophone service, which allowed wealthy stay-at-homes to hear live music through a telephone receiver held up during a concert. According to Edmund White's recent book on Proust in the Penguin Lives series, Proust became a subscriber to this service in 1911 and listened to Wagner and Debussy in this fashion.)

Perhaps the best justification for this movie is the old chestnut that Proust is profoundly cinematic, an idea the film doesn't so much prove as endlessly play with. Ever since I first became interested in film criticism I've been fascinated by a 1946 article by Jacques Bourgeois—published in *La revue du cinéma*, a postwar precursor of *Cahiers du cinéma*—arguing that Proust's novelistic techniques anticipate those of cinema in general and Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* in particular. One of Bourgeois's best ideas is that Proust's labyrinthine sentences proceed like camera movements—an insight whose truth becomes more apparent if one compares Proust's long sentences with those of, say, Henry James or William Faulkner, which bear no apparent relation to pans, tracks, or cranes. Welles is, of course, Ruiz's avowed master, and a good deal of *Time Regained* seems to proceed like an extension of Bourgeois's stylistic comparison, with not only camera move-

ments but the gliding displacements of objects and characters recreating some of the complex, winding journeys of Proust's sentences. At a climactic concert at a party, rows of listeners can be seen gliding off in separate directions as if on separate mind journeys, and in a much earlier surreal sequence featuring newsreel war footage in a café, the narrator, reading a letter, can be seen rising with his chair like a film director seated on a crane, all the way to the top of the room, where he encounters his own childhood self running a projector—an image that might be traced, like much else, to one of Proust's extended descriptive passages.

The problem is, even if many of Proust's long sentences are experienced as "movements" of this kind—and the musical meaning of the term also seems apt—this still doesn't take one very far into Proust's theories about the difference between involuntarily reexperiencing an instant of the past (which is what happens when the narrator bites into the madeleine dipped in tea or stubs his toe in Venice) and deliberately exploring the past through memory. Ruiz doesn't exactly avoid this topic, but he treats it as an occasion for another jokey representation rather than for a serious discussion of the topic—which is no surprise given his cinematic options. It's at moments like these when the stuffy old professors who insist that movies can never capture the density of literature seem absolutely right; in this case they can't even capture the same sensual immediacy. And some of the same strictures apply to Proust's subtle notations of the powerful investments of imagination and emotion in particular places.

When some of this film's detractors—including Roger Shattuck in his recently published *Proust's Way*—complain that people who haven't read the novel will find it incomprehensible, I can only reply that I regard this partly as a plus. One of the deadliest things about most of this summer's commercial movies is their absolute legibility and transparency, their total lack of mystery. Both times that I saw *Time Regained*—a year apart, with and without subtitles—I got lost more than once and basically liked the movie more as a consequence. One doesn't get lost in Proust's novel, whose overall lucidity is an abiding strength, but obscurity and unsolved mystery are central to what I like most about Ruiz.

My memories of reading Proust's novel depend largely on the first two sections—*Swann's Way* and *Within a Budding Grove*—serving as lenses for the final five, and it's possible that some of my difficulties with the movie stem from its use of the last section as a lens for the preceding six. It's a logical way to cram in a lot of material, and it has the particular merit of foregrounding the importance of

World War I in all the late episodes in the novel—thereby making possible what may be Ruiz's best realized and most physical single scene, the audible chewing of a steak by Robert de Saint-Loup (Pascal Greggory) in a posh restaurant with Marcel while he's temporarily back from the trenches. But it's still a far cry from the experience of reading most of the novel.

One facet of the interior-decoration syndrome that Ruiz seems fully ready to buy into is the presence of Proust himself—not merely Marcel, his narrator and perfunctory stand-in—as a high-priced object in the proceedings, reminding me of the most vulgar literary adaptations (*Hemingway's Adventures of a Young Man* and *Mishima*, for instance, both of which regard artistic work almost exclusively as Freudian symptoms). The film opens with Proust dictating *Remembrance of Things Past*, not with Marcel visiting Tansonville, which is how the book begins. This is where the so-called cinematic properties of the novel start to break down and the rather different dictates of movie spectacle take over. Yet at the same time Ruiz goes to considerable lengths to disembody both Proust and Marcel by creating an ambiguous zone between them that's inhabited by no less than six actors: Marcello Mazzarella as "Marcel," André Engel as "old Marcel," Jean Léger as the actor who dubs Engel, Georges du Fresne (star of the Belgian film *My Life in Pink*) as "Marcel as a child," Pierre Mignard as "Marcel as an adolescent," and finally director and actor Patrice Chereau as "the voice of Marcel Proust." Maybe most of the character revelations figure as footnotes, but the construction of the characters is still carried out in separate layers—the same way that Marcel Proust's cork-lined bedroom is introduced to us, displaced objects and all. And by having Proust acquaint us with each of his major characters via photographs seen through a magnifying glass—a method recalling the way we're introduced to the major characters at the beginning of some of Louis Feuillade's serials, made just after the war—Ruiz is in a way only capitalizing on the confusing relation of autobiography to fiction that Proust's novel already has in abundance.

One way to illustrate how close to and how far from the original Ruiz is would be to compare one early paragraph with one early sequence. Here is Proust's paragraph, as translated by Andreas Mayor. (This was the opening paragraph of *Le temps retrouvé* when this translation was still called *The Past Recaptured*, before the French Pléiade editors and Terence Kilmartin's 1982 Vintage edition put the beginning of the Tansonville episode that formerly appeared at the end of the previous section before it.)

"All day long, in that slightly too countrified house which seemed no more

than a place for a rest between walks or during a sudden downpour, one of those houses in which all the sitting-rooms look like arbors and, on the wallpaper in the bedrooms, here the roses from the garden, there the birds from the trees outside join you and keep you company, isolated from the world—for it was old wallpaper on which every rose was so distinct that, had it been alive, you could have picked it, every bird you could have put in a cage and tamed, quite different from those grandiose bedroom decorations of today where, on a silver background, all the apple trees of Normandy display their outlines in the Japanese style to hallucinate the hours you spend in bed—all day long I remained in my room which looked over the fine greenery of the park and the lilacs at the entrance, over the green leaves of the tall trees by the edge of the lake, sparkling in the sun, and the forest of Meseglise. Yet I looked at all this with pleasure only because I said to myself: 'How nice to be able to see so much greenery from my bedroom window,' until the moment when, in the vast verdant picture, I recognized, painted in a contrasting dark blue simply because it was further away, the steeple of Combray church. Not a representation of the steeple, but the steeple itself, which, putting in visible form a distance of miles and of years, had come, intruding its discordant tone into the midst of the luminous verdure—a tone so colorless that it seemed little more than a preliminary sketch—and engraved itself upon my windowpane. And if I left my room for a moment, I saw at the end of the corridor, in a little sitting-room which faced in another direction, what seemed to be a band of scarlet—for this room was hung with a plain silk, but a red one, ready to burst into flames if a ray of sun fell upon it."

The film's corresponding sequence, which lasts only a few seconds, gives us both the roses and the birds on the wallpaper—the former magically interfacing with the latter—before moving slowly toward the half-open window in Marcel's bedroom, where the trees in the garden seem to advance as well as retreat, until the blue Combray church steeple in the distance suddenly intrudes in the middle of the pan, playing still further with our confused sense of perspective by conveying some abstract sense of miles, though no sense of years. Meanwhile, the narrator's voice says, "All day long, in that slightly too countrified house which seemed no more than a place for a rest between walks or during a sudden downpour . . . where, on a silver background, all the apple trees of Normandy display their outlines in the Japanese style to hallucinate the hours you spend in bed—all day long I remained in my room which looked over the fine greenery of the park and the lilacs at the entrance, over the green leaves of the tall trees by the edge of the lake, sparkling in the sun, and the forest of Meseglise. Yet I looked at all this with pleasure only because I said to myself: 'How nice to be able to see so much greenery from my bedroom window,' until the moment when, in the vast

verdant picture, I recognized, painted in a contrasting dark blue simply because it was further away, the steeple of Combray church."

The original passage in Proust reeks of the narrator's sickbed and the swooning sensations of the outside world that only intensify his labored breathing and his vertigo. By contrast, the sequence in Ruiz is like a box of toys without a child to play with them—it feels virtually uninhabited, moving in effect from an experiment in optics (two merging kinds of wallpaper) to a detail in a pop-up book (the Combray church steeple) to a traverse of a green space resembling part of a model train set (a recurring motif in many earlier Ruiz films, including *Manuel*). A great deal of Proust's prose gets recited—some of it conjuring up images that complement rather than echo the images we see—but the sinuous musical experience of reading has been replaced by the more clustered and playful effects of shifting lights and perspectives, with the narrator serving more as a vehicle for the effects than as a character.

In short, Ruiz offers both a beautiful reduction and a translation that substantially shifts the meaning and emphasis of the original. It deals adroitly with those aspects of reading Proust that are like taking an exquisite theme-park ride but can't do much with elements that elude that experience. And, characteristically, Ruiz's taste for surrealism is allowed to overtake the novel's depictions of shaped experience in many of the film's most striking images, such as a crowd of upturned top hats covering the floor of an ornate antechamber.

Another recent, idiosyncratic "reading" of Proust, in no sense toylike, is Chantal Akerman's *La captive*, which premiered in Cannes in May and which I managed to see last month at the Pesaro Film Festival. It's not clear when we can hope to see it in the U.S., because it seems most American critics at Cannes didn't like it. But it has a purity and maturity matched by few of Akerman's other fiction films, apart from *Jeanne Dielman*, and its ambiguous handling of period—which sets all its action in the present while suggesting the opulent past throughout—evokes Robert Bresson's *Les dames du Bois de Boulogne*. Inspired by rather than adapted from the story of Marcel and Albertine that comprises the novel's fifth and sixth sections, *La prisonnière* (*The Captive*) and *Albertine disparue* (*The Fugitive*), it critiques the original by giving us much more of Albertine's view of Marcel's jealousy than Proust did. In this respect, Proust is Akerman's launching pad but not her destination.

It's questionable whether Ruiz achieves any of the same independence from his source. But unlike Joseph Strick's almost completely (and deservedly) forgotten 1967 film adaptation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Time Regained* can't be accused

of simple reductiveness; it doesn't sentimentalize any of the material or insult the viewer, and it can't be accused of turning the novel into a simple object. It's a complex reduction and a playful one—inviting the spectator who knows Proust to engage in a dialogue with it and the uninitiated spectator to get lost in the swirling patterns of an enchanting and highly entertaining trailer.

—*Chicago Reader*, July 21, 2000

James Benning's *Four Corners*

I've been brooding a lot lately about the way in which many of the best movies around have been ravaged by "narrative correctness." This is the notion fostered by producers, distributors, and critics—often collaborating as script doctors and always deeply invested in hackwork—that there are "correct" and "incorrect" ways of telling stories in movies. And woe to the filmmaker who steps out of line. Much as "political correctness" can point to a displaced political impotence—a desire to control language and representation that sets in after one despairs of changing the political conditions of power—"narrative correctness" has more to do with what supposedly makes a movie commercial than with what makes it interesting, artful, or innovative. Invariably narrative correctness means identifying with the people who pay for the pictures rather than with the people who make them.

Last year we had reviewers stomping on Jim Carrey in *The Cable Guy* and Tim Burton in *Mars Attacks!* for daring to move beyond their more lucrative formulas to try something different, though their crimes were crimes of subject and tone rather than of storytelling. This year filmmakers are more prone to be castigated and punished for perceived deficiencies in narrative fluidity. Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* was a triumph of style and mood over story until Miramax decided that story was more important than either mood or style; it recut the film and added reams of explanatory titles—all to the end of clarifying the muddled plot. Now clear, the plot proved just as dull as it had been, but the hypnotic visual rhythms that had made the film special were destroyed. (It flopped anyway, so everyone lost.) Editor Walter Murch performed a similar, if far more sophisticated, job on Robert Duvall's remarkable *The Apostle*. In both versions plot is the least interesting aspect, but after many reviewers complained—unjustifiably—that at 150 minutes it needed to be trimmed, Murch was called in to reduce it by seventeen minutes. Once again visual style was sacrificed to narrative clarity. The characters and performances might have been enhanced in the process, and the results are arguably more commercial. But the awesome feeling for extended, multifaceted events in the long-take original has been diminished for the sake of individual incidents and bite-size plot points. Meanwhile, American and Iranian critics have been clamoring for Abbas Kiarostami to remove the sublime ending

from his magnificent *Taste of Cherry*—even after it won the Palme d'Or at Cannes—presumably because the ending adds complexity and nuance to an experience they'd rather see simplified. (So far, Kiarostami has acquiesced in this mutilation only at some venues in Italy, and he and the film's U.S. distributor have assured me it won't happen here.)

Finally, consider the overall critical reception of Clint Eastwood's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil.* Eastwood has amply demonstrated in the past that he's a masterful storyteller when he wants to be, so you might think that when he experiments with something new critics would be curious about what he's after—especially since he has more commercial clout than Chen, Duvall, and Kiarostami combined and therefore doesn't have to mess with test marketing or distributors like Miramax. Think again. With few exceptions, the critical community has been content to declare his new movie devoid of interest because it fails to conform to a model of narrative correctness. Mood, atmosphere, style, performance, social analysis, and moral ambiguity never come up, because if a story isn't told a particular way to achieve a familiar effect, the movie can offer nothing of consequence.

As an experimental filmmaker from the get-go, James Benning can be regarded as exceptionally lucky, because nobody, including critics, has the power to muck around with his work. But then most critics are too busy chasing after sequels and remakes to even try to keep up with Benning's oeuvre, though if they did they'd have a hard time, because his films are rarely shown, and because none of them is available on video.

We're lucky that Benning has chosen Chicago for the world premiere (apart from one screening at the California Institute of the Arts, where he teaches) of *Four Corners*—his ninth feature and one of his strongest—and that he's showing it at an optimal screening facility, a private apartment in Wicker Park that's becoming public for the occasion. We're also lucky that *Four Corners* is so far removed from narrative correctness that the narrative police won't come anywhere near it, even to record their disapproval. This leaves the rest of us free to enjoy it without any sort of interference—a utopian setup even money can't buy.

A landscape artist who used to teach math in high school and is preoccupied with history, Benning combines all three interests in *Four Corners* through a singular structure that makes these concerns interdependent. The title site—the place where New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah meet—was also featured in Jon Jost's experimental feature *Uncommon Senses* (1988), which linked it to the geographical center of the United States: "A . . . place like the quadrant of Four Corners, designated by the happenstance of politics and geometry to symbolize, to represent, to stand, it seems, for some ineffable something: somehow, here, at the 'center of the nation' one anticipates a revelation, that the metaphysic of

nationhood would stand stripped, turn physical, palpable, something one could get one's hands on." Philosophically, Benning's project is fairly similar, but his means of carrying it out are quite different.

Like Jost, Benning shares the all-encompassing ambition of Walt Whitman, Thomas Wolfe, and Jack Kerouac to tackle this country as a whole, geographically as well as historically—one reason Benning and Jost have both made films recounting cross-country journeys (Benning's *North on Evers* and Jost's *Uncommon Senses*). In *Four Corners* the emphasis is on historical breadth more than geographical completeness, but the use of the Four Corners area points to a related aim to take in as much as possible. Image and text inform each other in a powerful way throughout the film, because there's an interesting formal relationship between the way Benning constructs images and the way he recounts history—favoring landscapes that are blocked off in discrete layers, describing the means by which various racial and ethnic groups have displaced one another (which constructs narratives composed of various historical layers).

Math structures the interplay. The film presents us with four scrolling texts about the lives of painters: Claude Monet, Moses Tolliver (a black laborer from Alabama who turned to painting after an accident crippled him), an unknown Native American artist born around A.D. 42 (her name, Yukuwa, and biography are inventions), and Jasper Johns. All four of these texts are composed of the same number of letters and spaces, and each of them is followed by an extended shot of a work by the painter who's just been described: Monet's *Poppy Field in a Hollow near Giverny* (1885), Tolliver's *George Washington* (1989, modeled loosely on Washington as he appears on a dollar bill), an authentic Native American rock painting *Holy Ghost* (dated approximately A.D. 100), and Jasper Johns's *Flag* (1955), a painting of the American flag. Each shot of a painting is accompanied by a long text—each read offscreen by a different speaker, including filmmakers Billy Woodberry and Hartmut Bitomsky, as well as Benning—that recounts the history of a particular place in America in relation to individual lives as well as collective migrations. Each of these shots is followed by thirteen briefer shots with ambient sound of the place that has just been described: Chaco Canyon; a Milwaukee neighborhood (where Benning grew up); Mesa Verde; and Farmington, New Mexico. To complete the mathematical formalism of Benning's structure, each of the four texts is composed of the same number of words. And bracketing all of the preceding are two long shots accompanied by music: at the beginning of the film, a shot of a bonfire with ambient sound and "Song for the Journey," a traditional Cherokee chant performed by Little Wolf Band, a contemporary Navajo group; and at the end of the film, a shot of a Hopi pueblo at First Mesa with ambient sound and "I Sang the Blues," a number recorded circa 1970 by New York rap progenitors the Last Poets.

One thing I like about Benning is that he knows how to look at things, places as well as paintings. Except for his opening shot of the bonfire, which is probably handheld, he keeps his camera stationary, preferring to allow us to take our time with a landscape or painting and get to know it as we would a friend. In this respect he has a lot in common with European filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, whose 1989 *Cézanne* shows a comparable power and humility in confronting art and nature. And like them, he's interested in tracing what might be called historical deposits—social as well as geological—in paintings and landscapes.

How, one may ask, are these paintings and these places supposed to be related? In a way, the whole complex experience of *Four Corners* is bound up with this question, and some of the answers provided are more satisfying than others. The fact that both kinds of sites are described and historically grounded before they're seen, and the fact that they're never seen and described at the same time, calls to mind Hollis Frampton's 1971 masterpiece *Nostalgia*, which creates a similar staggered effect between photographs slowly ignited and burned on a hot plate and spoken descriptions of the photographs that precede them. It's politically and conceptually bold of Benning to give us such a wide range of painters and paintings and ask us to consider them as part of the same historical continuum. All four painters might be regarded as influences on his own art, but he selectively excludes himself as an artist from this group of four individuals, even as he includes some of his own personal history in Milwaukee as part of a much larger historical narrative.

Benning, reading offscreen, describes himself as part of the white German-American community that had migrated to Milwaukee and was eventually displaced by black families, occasioning much racial strife (he participated in a civil rights demonstration in 1967 and was beaten unconscious by other poor white kids as a consequence). This points to a complex, nuanced sense of history that isn't content to divvy up the settlers into heroes and villains. (We also learn, among many fascinating details, that Milwaukee had a socialist mayor for half a century, beginning in 1910, at the same time that "labor leaders desired to keep Milwaukee white and discriminated against blacks through exclusionary clauses.")

Less satisfying—not so much politically incorrect as politically and historically muddled—are the scrolling texts about the lives of the painters, at least as they register in relation to the other elements in the film. We learn when and where Monet was born, what his father did, something about his abbreviated military service, his subsequent love life, and his children; but what any of this has to do with *Poppy Field in a Hollow near Giverny*, which he painted after the events of this narrative, isn't even remotely clear. The grim story of Moses Tolliver preced-

ing the shot of *George Washington* is a good deal more coherent in relation to Benning's overall project, because it reminds us of some of the themes in the longer historical narratives; the same thing could be said, though to a lesser extent, of the invented life of Yukuwa preceding *Holy Ghost*. But when we get to Jasper Johns's biography prior to the shot of *Flag*, the dry inventory of facts seems just as meaningless and arbitrary as the events leading up to the Monet painting. Why, for instance, is it important for us to know about Monet's sexuality but not about Johns's? Why are we told something about the military service of both painters but nothing about their painterly influences? My point isn't to impose a program on these two biographical sketches but simply to find one. I suspect the reason I can't may be that Benning views the art of Monet and Johns as transcendental and ineffable, while his grasp of what happens to landscapes and people living in them over time is much more material. Or maybe he was just hamstrung when trying to figure out how to fill in all the blanks of his grand design. Either way, he tends to isolate all four of the paintings from any history other than that of the artists who painted them, and the history of each painting stops at the time it was painted—how it did or didn't find an audience or become part of history isn't addressed.

According to the usual critical protocol, *Four Corners* is a nonnarrative film (despite the fact that it's chock-full of stories, most of them fascinating and all of them easy to follow) and *Temptress Moon*, *The Apostle*, and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* are all narrative films (despite the fact that their stories are the least significant things about them). It's a merchandising problem for artists and audiences alike. One of the more lamentable offshoots of this strangled terminology is that it forces artists and audiences as well as critics to wrench some of their natural instincts out of shape.

In most so-called narrative films it's normally assumed that story is a conveyor belt taking goods (stars, production values, special effects, explosions) to an audience, so it follows that when the conveyor belt breaks down nothing can be delivered. (According to this argument, it's wrong to enjoy Maggie Cheung or an explosion in a stupid story that makes no sense—though millions do every day.) In most so-called nonnarrative films it's normally assumed that the absence of a conveyor belt allows us to notice and appreciate things in a less compulsory manner, as if we were standing in front of a painting—which implies that we aren't being conducted on a tour through time and space.

Both assumptions are rule-of-thumb postulates that are broken by creative people—artists and audiences alike—every day of the week. In the case of *Four Corners*, all sorts of interesting stories are being told—in the scrolled titles, in the offscreen narration, in the beautiful landscapes and precious glimpses of everyday life that Benning acutely frames, and even in the music. But the most interest-

ing story of all is the one each viewer winds up telling in the course of combining, juxtaposing, and synthesizing all these stories. The same thing happens in the best commercial movies—some of which prefer to use stories as clotheslines rather than as conveyor belts, and most of which tend to gain something when they allow us some freedom in our responses. Any tour through time and space worthy of the name is likely to have moments when standing still is as important as moving, when thinking is as important as feeling—at least if we assume that movies can be worthy of thought or reflection.

—*Chicago Reader*, December 12, 1997

Overrated Solutions

L'humanité

One of my favorite Italian novels, long out of print in English, is a sort of Roman police procedural in which the central crime never gets solved: Carlo Emilio Gadda's *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana* (1946). It's so beloved in Italy that it has a nickname, *Il pasticciaccio*, and when Gadda died in 1973 at the age of eighty, it had gone through several editions; William Weaver's English translation of 1965 was based on the seventh.

Weaver, who wrote that "*Il pasticciaccio* occupies in contemporary Italian literature the position that *Ulysses*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, and *The Man Without Qualities* occupy in the literature of their respective countries," also noted that a good many of Gadda's other fictional works are "unfinished, but not incomplete. Even the briefest of Gadda's fragments has its own curious wholeness; and if the 'murder story' aspect of *Il pasticciaccio* remains unresolved, one feels—at the end of this long, apparently ambling work—that it is better *not* to know who is responsible for the death of Signora Liliana. The reader feels that he has probed deeply enough already into the evil and horror of the world and that yet another, worse revelation of it would be more than the reader, the author, and the protagonist [Detective] Ingravallo could bear. Though students of Gadda's work might not agree, one also suspects that his novels were born to be fragments, like certain imaginary ruins in Venetian painting, perfect parts of impossible wholes."

On a reviewer's holiday last month, I went to see Pietro Germi's 1959 adaptation of *Il pasticciaccio*, *The Facts of Murder*, at the Film Center and was disappointed but not surprised to find the plot "resolved," the murderer uncovered. Consequently, what registers as a feeling of infinite expansion in the range of material embraced by the novel becomes not only finite in the film but ultimately forgettable and disposable. On its own terms, the movie has many virtues, but the experience it offers is profoundly dissimilar.

This has led to some reflections on a few of the fundamental differences between novels and movies as they exist in the world. Kafka is allowed to leave all his novels unfinished—and, indeed, might not even be valued as much today if he'd forced conclusions on *Amerika*, *The Trial*, or *The Castle*. But Welles is castigated by most of his biographers for leaving a few of his films unfinished, and

Eyes Wide Shut is automatically diminished in some people's eyes for not having been fully mixed by Kubrick before he died. Similarly, we tolerate some paintings and symphonies having been left unfinished but not movies because what we call their "formal" demands—and what might actually just be the dictates of the business—necessitate a certain closure.

Thanks to this artistic double standard, I would argue that there are certain films that would be better—artistically better, philosophically better, and existentially more honest—if they had been left unfinished. Unfortunately, the business of film distribution dictates that the unfinished films are generally the ones we don't get to see (Welles is a prime example), and consequently the ones we wind up seeing are all finished—a fact that obviously affects our expectations. Or, to view the problem somewhat differently, some films out of necessity only pretend to be finished while their real virtues are inextricably bound up with their unfinished states.

Foremost among the latter is Bruno Dumont's powerful second feature, *L'humanité*—another police procedural—playing this week at Facets Multimedia Center. I hasten to add that the mystery in this case is solved at the end, but maybe it shouldn't have been. Dumont himself seems open to this possibility when he writes the following, in notes about the film distributed to the press:

> [Jean-Pierre] Melville used to say that the cop genre was a good vehicle.
>
> A police investigation is a sound movement . . . a dialectic: the quest for truth in a concrete and common expression, where it is innocently at work.
>
> The discovery doesn't really matter. What counts is the movement: looking.

I would argue, moreover, that Dumont's film *is* "unfinished" in the sense that some paintings are; that is, some parts of the "canvas" are only sketched in while other parts are fully realized. As a mannerist portraiture of a few individuals, it's often amazing; as a spiritual statement about suffering in the contemporary world, it almost lives up to its title; for its blunt depictions of sex, it's about as carnal in an unvarnished way as filmmaking can get; and as a visual rendering of an area of northern France (Dumont's home town, also the setting of his first feature, *The Life of Jesus*), it's also pretty impressive. But as a police procedural, it's pretty unsatisfying, and far from being worked out in all its details.

Some of these details, for that matter, are in direct conflict with some of the virtues indicated above. For one thing, as Dumont himself pointed out in an interview with Toronto critic Mark Peranson, the film doesn't qualify in any way as "realist," though the nonprofessional actors and the locations may occasionally foster that impression—thereby leading one to expect a certain verisimilitude

regarding the plot and the psychology of certain characters that the film doesn't furnish.

There's nothing reprehensible about any of this. Given what Dumont is wrestling with, and the Dostoevsky-like ambitions of what he's attempting, it's the most honorable sort of failing one can imagine. Yet because it's a movie and not a painting or a symphony, this failing has made some people very angry. When a jury at Cannes last year headed by David Cronenberg awarded *L'humanité* the grand jury prize and awards for best actor (Emmanuel Schotté) and actress (Séverine Caneele, in a tie with *Rosetta*'s Emilie Dequenne), the international press was scandalized. The fact that both Schotté and Caneele were nonprofessionals contributed to the outrage, but other issues relating to "professionalism" were undoubtedly at play as well—above all, conformity to certain genre expectations. The notion of a dramatic payoff in Dostoevsky or in a serial killer mystery is hardly the same thing, and audiences looking for the latter clearly felt cheated.

The crime in *L'humanité* is the rape and murder of an eleven-year-old girl on her way home from school, and practically the first thing we encounter in the film is the anguished response of the hero, detective's assistant Pharaon De Winter (Emmanuel Schotté), after seeing her naked body in a field. Not long afterwards, in order to get us to share his trauma, Dumont focuses in close-up on her bloody vagina. And though a certain amount of the remainder of this 148-minute film dutifully follows the investigation of the crime until an arrest is made, the details of what happened and why never become a central concern.

The major focus is Pharaon (Schotté), who lives with his mother and is silently though transparently smitten with his twenty-three-year-old neighbor Domino (Caneele)—a factory worker who's sexually involved with a loutish bus driver named Joseph (Philippe Tullier) but who frequently invites Pharaon along on many of her excursions with her boyfriend. (He himself accidentally witnesses her having sex with Joseph one of the three times in the film that we're shown this activity, but when she crudely offers to have sex with Pharaon on another occasion, he rejects the invitation.) We learn in passing that Pharaon previously had a girlfriend and baby and "lost" both two years ago, but no further details about them or what happened is forthcoming—which is perhaps the sketchiest single aspect of the film, because we may not even be able to accept this detail.

Some commentators maintain that Pharaon is unbelievable as a cop. My own small-town experience suggests that all kinds of people wind up in all kinds of jobs, but I'll concede that he's not entirely believable in various other ways. I can buy the fact that he's sensitive, wide-eyed, and fairly ineffectual in most social

situations. (An ironic and telling exception is when he disrupts a group of striking factory workers, Domino among them, who are trying to speak to the mayor.) Iconographically and poetically, he's one of those tender-hearted "simple souls" that we associate with D. W. Griffith—Richard Barthelmess's nameless Chinaman in *Broken Blossoms* (1919) is a key example—destined to be brutalized by the world at large; but it's also worth saying that Dumont doesn't always idealize him. He's a veritable stand-in for suffering humanity itself—with some justice, critic Robin Wood maintains that this is a film "about Somalia, Kosovo, East Timor" and "school massacres," among other things—and his practice of offering commiserating hugs to arrested criminals and to a doctor at a mental hospital are a good example of the sort of departures from realism that this movie periodically takes. A more obvious example is a brief shot that shows Pharaon levitating in his garden—a moment that places Dumont in the territory of Pier Paolo Pasolini (who created a comparable moment with Laura Betti in his *Teorema*) more than that of Robert Bresson.

Like Pasolini, Dumont seems to regard Christianity itself as a kind of exemplary scandal. This implicit notion was also apparent in his first feature, *The Life of Jesus*, which depicted a similar milieu of louts and sensitive souls in the same town in northern France, showed nudity and sex with the same carnal bluntness, and was similarly both broad and austere in its employments of sound (sparse and selective country noises) and image ('Scope framing with lots of empty spaces).

A fearless filmmaker, Dumont seems willing to risk the perils of using characters as metaphors for metaphysical states of being even when this plays havoc with the usual expectations of storytelling. As a stylist, he likes to linger over his characters and landscapes with the firm patience of a portrait artist, allowing a kind of calm wisdom to emerge from his contemplative moments. (This is a hysterical film only in terms of its subject matter.)

L'humanité is above all a film of physiognomies: the hero's ruddy-cheeked, overweight boss is a kind of earthy physical type we've hardly ever seen before in movies—at least not since the 30s, when, as Manny Farber once pointed out, people hadn't yet gotten into the habit of jogging, and "every shape was legitimate." Big-boned, desultory Domino, hanging out in front of her house like a refugee from Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher*, is an even more painterly subject who seems to luxuriate in her own Amazonian diffidence. Like Pharaon himself, both these characters seem to suggest that if you ponder some parts of the world long enough and hard enough, solving a mystery becomes a pretty trivial business, because it doesn't prove anything.

—*Chicago Reader*, June 23, 2000

The Sound of German

Straub-Huillet's *The Death of Empedocles*

Three pretentious but relevant quotes: "Aesthetics are the ethics of the future" (Lenin). "To make a revolution also means to put back into place things that are very ancient but forgotten" (Charles Péguy). "When the Green of the Earth Will Shine Freshly for You" (Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's subtitle for *The Death of Empedocles*).

For spectators who don't know what to do with their films, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet offer a rigorous program that's all work and no play—a grueling process of wrestling with intractable texts, often in languages that one doesn't understand, without the interest provided by easy-to-read characters or compelling plots. But in fact every one of Straub-Huillet's fifteen films to date (ten features and five shorts) offers an arena of play as well as work, and opportunities for sensual enjoyment as well as analytical reflection. To find this arena of play and pleasure, one has to go beyond what we usually associate with the enjoyment of culture—beyond parameters that are usually limited by mutually exclusive notions of "art," "entertainment," "education," and "scholarship," notions that generally make us smile or groan in advance, regardless of what is placed in front of us.

Among the intellectuals in Europe who make marginal films (as opposed to the more widely circulated "art films" of Godard, Ruiz, Kluge et al.), Straub and Huillet are in many ways the most respected, but their works are seldom dealt with in this country. Utopian Marxists with a taste and passion for nature, antiquity, direct sound, and obscure, mainly neglected texts, they remain materialist thorns in the sides of those critics and programmers who believe that films are meant to be consumed rather than grappled with.

It's taken two years for *The Death of Empedocles*, the couple's latest feature, to cross the Atlantic, and, apart from a single screening in Berkeley six weeks ago, its appearance here at Facets Multimedia represents its U.S. premiere. (That Facets is running it for a whole week also makes this the first "commercial" run Straub-Huillet have had in the U.S. since *Moses and Aaron* opened in New York in 1975.) The handful of American colleagues I know who have seen *Empedocles*, in Berlin or Paris in 1986, have dismissed it as Straub-Huillet's least rewarding and/or most "punishing" feature. I think they're dead wrong about this, but I have to

admit that the film is likely to be unrewarding or worse if approached with the wrong frame of mind or set of expectations.

The conflicts, textures, pleasures, and meanings of all Straub-Huillet films are created in the encounter of one or more preexisting texts (verbal or musical) with concrete places/settings or landscapes. In each film the complex balance of the encounter is distinctly different. The texts have ranged from fiction (by Bertolt Brecht, Heinrich Böll, Marguerite Duras, Franz Kafka, and Cesare Pavese) to poetry (by Saint John of the Cross and Stéphane Mallarmé); from plays (by Ferdinand Bruckner and Pierre Corneille) to letters (by Friedrich Engels and Arnold Schoenberg); and from political statements (by Franco Fortini and Mahmoud Hussein) to musical pieces (by Bach and Schoenberg). The locations have included urban and rural landscapes in Egypt, France, Germany, and Italy, as well as shots in New York and Saint Louis to supplement the mainly German footage of *Amerika / Class Relations*, their 1984 Kafka adaptation.

Some Straub-Huillet films use musical texts (notably their 1967 *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*), and some use both musical and verbal texts (their 1972 *Introduction to Arnold Schönberg's Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene*, and their 1975 film of Schoenberg's opera *Moses and Aaron*). *The Death of Empedocles* might be described as their first fully musical film with only a verbal text. The highly metrical blank verse of Friedrich Hölderlin (the first of three versions of an unfinished verse tragedy, written in 1798) becomes in effect the libretto for an opera or oratorio that uses the chance contributions of the wind, insects, birds, plants, clouds, and sun as orchestral accompaniment. (There's also the barking of an offscreen dog and, behind the opening and closing credits, bursts of actual music as well as thunder.)

The pleasure to be found in the sound of Hölderlin text—which is performed in rural locations in Sicily near Mount Etna—is in a way unprecedented in Straub-Huillet's work. Their 1969 adaptation of Corneille's *Othon* on a Roman hilltop surrounded by contemporary traffic was largely an exercise in comic distancing effects: the lines were delivered (rather than acted) by mainly non-French actors at breakneck speed and with little expression, accompanied at times by lengthy camera movements and at many other times by ambient distractions ranging from the splash of a nearby fountain to the growl of a passing motorcycle. Poems by Saint John of the Cross were used for dramatic recitations in *The Bridegroom, the Comedienne, and the Pimp* (1968), but these were only some of the materials used in a densely compacted narrative structure. In *Every Revolution Is a Throw of the Dice* (1977) a group of nine men and women recited Mallarmé's "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance" while seated in Paris's Père Lachaise cemetery near a plaque commemorating the Paris Commune victims of 1871; but here again the delivery was comically poker-faced.

It was in their hilarious 1982 short *En râchâchant*, based on a children's book by Marguerite Duras, that Straub-Huillet began to make use of expressive acting in the conventional sense—a practice developed further in *Amerika / Class Relations* two years later. The fully acted *The Death of Empedocles* benefits from this experience. Some of the actors are non-German, which leads to an accented delivery of the sort that Straub and Huillet have often favored whether the spoken language has been French, German, or Italian. But here the rhythmic delivery of the lines has a physical presence, and the film undertakes a voluptuous exploration of German's various tonalities that virtually reinvents the language. The sound of German (which I neither read nor speak) has usually been somewhat harsh and abrasive to my ears, but *The Death of Empedocles* manages to make the language sing with a depth and beauty that I've never heard before. Clearly this is a richly textured music that belongs to Hölderlin, but Straub and Huillet have conducted it with a special feeling for both its potential drama and its range of tones and cadences; moreover, they have recorded it live in such a way that it blends pleasurably with the ambient sounds of nature without ever being overpowered by them.

This, too, is relatively new in Straub-Huillet's work. As they have progressively developed and refined their filmmaking methods, the power and resonance of the places they film—above all, rural Italy in *From the Cloud to the Resistance* (1978) and Cairo and rural Egypt in *Too Early, Too Late* (1981)—have sometimes threatened to overwhelm their texts, or at least to take the upper hand. Far from damaging the films in question, this imbalance has strengthened their capacity to teach us how to look and listen. "Attending to" a text is partially what these films are about, and this is admittedly an activity that requires a certain amount of work. But "attending to" a place is just as important, and in the case of these two films it involves an equal amount of play—a freedom to drift through, circle around, meditate on, cast about in, and sensually enjoy (as well as think about) the physical reality that is recorded on film with such tact and precision.

These priorities are altered somewhat in *The Death of Empedocles*—not because its locations are less than beautiful, or inappropriate as settings for the verse, but because the principal undirected pleasure of this film is found more in the text itself, as it's delivered, than in the places that enclose its performance. In *Too Early, Too Late*, long, lingering looks at the Egyptian countryside traversed by villagers and animals provided a kind of lens through which one could read an offscreen recitation of Mahmoud Hussein's text. In *The Death of Empedocles*, Hölderlin's text provides a lens through which we can "read" the natural landscape of Mount Etna and environs (which, by the way, are beautifully shot in 35-millimeter by Renato Berta).

So far I've said next to nothing about the (minimal) plot and (elusive) mean-

ings of *The Death of Empedocles* (text and film). Straub-Huillet use a version of the play that's unavailable in English, and I've only been able to see the film once. A few clues are nevertheless in order.

The *Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* has the following to say about the historical Empedocles: "c. 495–c. 435 B.C., Greek philosopher. He held that everything in existence is composed of four underived and indestructible substances—fire, water, earth, and air—and that atmosphere is a corporeal substance, not a mere void. He believed that motion is the only sort of change possible and that apparent changes in quantity and quality are in fact changes of position of the basic particles underlying the observable object. Thus he first stated a principle central to modern physics." Empedocles was also a statesman who lived in the Sicilian town of Agrigentum—he came into conflict with the citizens of that town and ultimately killed himself by leaping into the crater of Mount Etna.

According to critic L. S. Sulzberger, Hölderlin's main source about Empedocles was a work by Diogenes Laertius, but "at the same time his hero is the favorite child of his own imagination. Empedocles, poet, magician, prophet, political reformer and savior of his people, exemplifies the genius as Hölderlin imagined him." He can also be described from Hölderlin's vantage point as "a disciple of Rousseau," an embodiment of "that human self-consciousness and reason characteristic of a contemporary of Kant's," a mediator between the realms of nature and art, a Hegelian hero who emerged in a time of crisis to resolve the conflicts of his age, and a figure in some ways comparable to Goethe's Faust. (A contemporary of Hegel and Goethe—as well as Kant—Hölderlin had personal dealings with both.)

Clearly a mystic, Hölderlin's Empedocles (played in the film by Andreas von Rauch) is accused of blasphemy by two of the town's representatives, the priest Hermocrates (Howard Vernon) and the political leader Critias (William Berger), who incite the populace against him and drive him into exile with his young disciple Pausanias (Vladimir Baratta). The blasphemy of Empedocles consists of his claim to be divine, which Hölderlin interprets as a flaw of genius—loving the gods too intensely and therefore identifying too closely with them. Empedocles' punishment for this presumption is that he no longer is able to serve as the gods' mouthpiece. Other characters of importance include Panthea (Martina Baratta), the daughter of Critias, and her somewhat older friend, Delia (Ute Cremer), who discuss Empedocles before and after his expulsion from Agrigentum.

In the second act, as Empedocles approaches Mount Etna, the citizens of the town change their minds, intercept him and Pausanias, and try to persuade him to come back as their ruler. Empedocles angrily refuses their offer and announces that he is determined to die, offering himself as a sacrifice for the redemption of his fellow men and thus renewing his spiritual function as a link between mortals

and gods. (If Hölderlin had completed this or his two subsequent versions of the play, presumably three more acts would have followed before Empedocles leaped into the volcano.)

The film opens, after a brief shot of trees and grass, with Panthea and Delia, shown in separate shots, conversing in what they describe as Empedocles' garden. Each character looks offscreen at the other, but the editing of the separate shots is disjunctive. As they frequently do (most notably in *History Lessons*, 1972), Straub and Huillet break the usual continuity rules for cutting between the offscreen looks of conversing characters, obliging the spectator to construct the space between the characters rather than accept it as a given. This leads to an ironic and surprising effect when, in the middle of a speech by Panthea, the two characters are finally brought together in the same frame, and we discover that they're standing less than three feet apart.

One probably shouldn't interpret such an effect too literally; Straub-Huillet's unconventional handling of space has always been part of a broader project to deprogram our expectations. But the isolation of certain characters from one another (Empedocles from the town leaders, the women from the men) is generally adhered to so rigorously that exceptions to this rule—such as shots showing Empedocles with Pausanias, or the town leaders with one another—often register as privileged moments. As a rule, the conflicts between spiritual and social concerns, and between self and community, seem to determine the placement of characters, and the sudden pairing of Panthea and Delia in the same shot may imply that their separate positions—moral and social as well as spatial—are closer than we initially assume them to be.

In a subsequent scene between Panthea and Delia, however—after the expulsion of Empedocles, when the difference between their positions is handled more dramatically—the relation of each character to the natural surroundings becomes more pertinent. The two women are seen both separately and together, and their conflicting attitudes about Empedocles and what he represents are graphically illustrated by their separate positions. Delia stands under a shaded tunnel formed by two rows of trees (except when she steps forward to embrace Panthea or to kneel at her feet), and Panthea stands at the edge of this tunnel with the sky and sun-soaked greenery behind her. The orderly, man-made enclosure formed by the rows of trees suggests the shaded comforts and confinement of society itself. The freedom and obstinacy of Panthea in the open air ("I honor him, yes, and if you do not know it, I say it to your face"), combined with her refusal to budge, calls to mind the stubborn intransigence of Carl Dreyer's Gertrud in relation to the demands of her own society, and in this respect Panthea resembles the white-haired Empedocles himself.

The difficulty posed by *The Death of Empedocles* for some of Straub-Huillet's

former partisans (one of whom told me that "it makes *Moses and Aaron* seem like *The Sound of Music*") probably has something to do with its relative visual stasis. If memory serves, camera movement is entirely absent (or at best restricted to a few brief pans), and the rigorous framing—which always has the effect in Straub-Huillet films of making separate shots register with the weight of enormous blocks of concrete—often seems to be drawing the tragedy to a standstill, whether the camera is trained on characters, landscapes, or characters and landscapes together.

But the appearance of stasis is deceptive. Three elements in the film are in virtually constant motion: Hölderlin's text, the actors' gestures, and nature—the wind in the trees, passing clouds, sounds of life, changes of light. And the juxtaposition of these movements with static camera setups is essential to the film's music and rhythm.

The abstract density and difficulty of the verse undoubtedly poses another potential stumbling block, but there are many possible ways of dealing with it. Barton Byg's subtitles are selective rather than exhaustive and can probably be read more fruitfully as footnotes than as a substitute for the full German text, which remains the film's richest source of sensual pleasure. Part of Straub-Huillet's achievement is to dramatize this text well beyond any possible silent reading of it by giving it a maximal physicality in sound, emotion, and gesture. And because so much of the text is concerned with the physicality of nature (as well as the four elements), the static camera setups function musically in a way that is analogous to pedal points; like sustained or suspended chords, they allow the melodies of the verse and the countermelodies of the surrounding natural sounds to take root. (Significantly, many of the characters' exits are heard offscreen rather than seen; Straub and Huillet often follow Robert Bresson's avowed practice of replacing image with sound whenever possible.)

Although Straub and Huillet are utopians in the sense that they make their films for ideal spectators, the fact that none of us is an ideal spectator shouldn't leave any of us out in the cold. Perceiving the world is a formidable enterprise without the diverse clues offered by art, and the ultimate accomplishment of Straub and Huillet is to make the task easier, not harder.

Their radical definition of art includes an extraordinary sense of openness as well as of closure, and even counters our sense of what constitutes an integral work. The version of *The Death of Empedocles* being shown in Chicago is actually only one of four that were shot and released: each version was shot in the same language, with the same actors and camera setups, but each one uses different takes of each shot, which means that the interventions and contributions of nature differ. For instance, the barking dog heard offscreen in this version (which was also shown in France with French subtitles) is not heard in the first

version or the third; however, the first version does feature a lizard crossing the ground in the scene that shows Empedocles freeing his slaves, and in the third an offscreen rooster crows during one of Empedocles' speeches. The implication is that masterpieces are neither as fixed nor as impervious to chance as we ordinarily suppose; instead of assuming that art should work against the vicissitudes of nature, we might welcome a natural world in which an obscure German poet and a distant mountain can equally find their place.

—*Chicago Reader,* December 2, 1988

Beyond the Clouds

Return to Beauty

Chicago has had a plethora of film festivals lately—Women in the Director's Chair, Polish Movie Springtime, Chicago Latino Film Festival, the Asian American Showcase. This is probably good for filmmakers who want their work shown, but I'm not sure it's a boon for moviegoers. For one thing, the screening of so many films at once makes it easy for good work to get lost. Billions of dollars are now spent annually making and promoting a few dozen movies—most of them dogs—that the media obligingly make visible and label important, and everything else is consigned to relative oblivion. The most any obscure film can hope for—good or bad, major or minor—is to compete with all the other obscure films. This is tantamount to tripling the number of passengers in steerage without increasing the provisions: more people get to travel, but everyone gets brutalized in the process.

For another thing, the festivals seem based on the assumption that tribal notions determine which films should be shown and seen together. Such notions have little to do with my own interest in seeing movies, and they sometimes force festival organizers to shove square pegs through round holes. *Dance Me to My Song, Post Concussion,* and *Bugaboo* are all by, with, and about people playing fictionalized versions of themselves: a woman with spastic cerebral palsy who wants to have a sex life, a former management consultant developing a new life while recovering from a serious head injury, and an engineer trying to overcome boredom in Silicon Valley. Theoretically, each of these films could have appeared in any of several recent festivals. But because the cerebral palsy victim (the lead actor and cowriter) is female, *Dance Me to My Song* wound up in Women in the Director's Chair, even though the director is male. *Post Concussion,* whose former management consultant is Korean-American, and *Bugaboo,* whose engineer is Indian, wound up in the Asian American Showcase.

All of which is pretty confusing, especially since the former management consultant's Korean-American background seems to have no bearing whatsoever on the story in *Post Concussion.* However, the press notes for *Bugaboo* state that the film "has been made by, for, and about Silicon Valley engineers. It should also have a wider appeal among expatriate Indians and Indians in the urban centers of India"—two more categories I don't belong to. It makes me feel vaguely

guilty for not searching out festivals of films by, for, and about male Jewish-American film critics so I can explore my own issues.

Dance Me to My Song was made in 1998; I presume it took two years to reach Chicago because it's Australian and it centers on someone with spastic cerebral palsy. So why did it take twice as long for the last feature of Michelangelo Antonioni, playing this week at the Music Box, to make it here? After all, *Beyond the Clouds*—a sketch film containing four stories by Antonioni—is mainly about sex, is full of attractive and well-known stars, and was a box-office smash when it was released in Europe in 1996, reportedly doing better in Italy than any previous Antonioni film.

I can't think of a reason for this absurd delay, apart from some version of the usual American art-house jitters. But maybe it's because not once in the past four years did anybody think of organizing a festival of films in Chicago that all happen to be beautiful. I suppose the very idea sounds indecent, hokey, and scandalously out-of-date—and so, I'm afraid, will *Beyond the Clouds*, a movie guaranteed to embarrass and intimidate and enthrall at least some of us for precisely the same reasons. A monument of sorts to political incorrectness and outdatedness, it stands at the very end of an Italian tradition in cinema represented by Antonioni, Fellini, Pasolini, Rossellini, and Visconti—much as Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, according to film historian Tom Gunning, stands at the very end of what might be called the Viennese school of Lang, Preminger, Sternberg, Stroheim, and Wilder.

There are a lot of beautiful things in *Beyond the Clouds:* the style, the settings, the bodies of young men and women—many of them beautiful in the vaguely blank way that models are. The movie isn't so much sexy as erotic, and, as with the rest of Antonioni, it's every bit as involved with the erotics of place as with the erotics of flesh; the two might even be said to become intertwined, and Antonioni's style, his mise en scène, might be described in part as the process of that intertwining, carried out with camera, actors, and locations. Sometimes colors and textures play a central role in this interplay; when an American man (Peter Weller) in the third episode visits his Italian mistress (Chiara Caselli) for love-making on two occasions at her Paris flat, her red silk blouse in the first visit and the red in her pillows, sheets, and bedspread in the second make a stronger impression than her skin. And the rhyme effects created in the same story between one flat filled with objects and another flat stripped of furniture create a comparable kind of visual poetry—one that eventually brings two strangers together, Weller's neglected wife (Fanny Ardant) and a recently abandoned husband (Jean Reno).

"Beauty nowadays is largely out of fashion," writes Gilberto Perez in his invaluable recent book *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium*, which also

contains one of the best appreciations of Antonioni. "Postmodernists mostly disown it. As a quality men see in women ('Beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing,' said Santayana), feminists largely discountenance it. The Thatcherite aesthetician Roger Scruton thinks it too imprecise a notion for meaningful consideration; but an aesthetician who cannot talk about beauty had better find another line of work. On the left beauty is suspect both of being elitist, the plaything of a privileged few, and of being a whore seductively selling the ideology of the ruling class. In the puritanism of today, a puritanism on the right and on the left, beauty is to be approached with the protective crucifix of (Right or Left) political correctness."

Politically correct viewers may also find it indecent that Antonioni made *Beyond the Clouds* when he was eighty-three—a dirty old man by our usual puritanical standards. It was the same year that he received a lifetime achievement award at the Oscars and ten years after a stroke that left him partially paralyzed and largely unable to speak. (He hadn't made a feature since *Identification of a Woman* in 1982, another highly erotic movie—and one that's never opened commercially in the U.S., though Facets Multimedia is bringing it out on video this July.) That he was able to make this film was partly due to the patient devotion and persistence of several individuals, including his wife, Enrica (who interpreted his instructions to the actors and crew whenever his gestures, eye movements, and drawings didn't suffice), and coproducer Stéphane Tchalgadjieff (perhaps the most adventurous of all European producers, whose credits include Jacques Rivette's *Out 1*, Marguerite Duras's *India Song*, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Fortini-Cani*, and Robert Bresson's *The Devil, Probably*). Antonioni's age and condition posed problems for the insurers, so Wim Wenders offered his services as a "standby director" and wound up directing and cowriting the prologue, epilogue, and the interludes between the four stories, all of which feature John Malkovich as a roaming filmmaker looking for material. Antonioni kept only two of these segments in the final editing; he and others agreed that using them all would have weighed the film down. He tried to shoot another feature about a year ago in the U.S. but had to quit—making it extremely unlikely that *Beyond the Clouds* will have a successor.

The four stories and the Malkovich monologues are all adapted from a singular collection of stories by Antonioni, *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber: Tales of a Director*, published in Italian in 1983 and in English three years later. (The film adroitly mixes dialogue in Italian, English, and French.) There are thirty-three stories or fragments in the book, ranging in length from three sentences to fourteen pages. The shortest, a piece of fancy entitled "Antarctic," reads, "The Antarctic glaciers are moving in our direction at a rate of three millimeters per year. Calculate when they'll reach us. Anticipate, in a film, what will happen."

The translator, the late William Arrowsmith, points out in his sensitive preface that these stories and concepts invite the reader into the director's workshop, though they're neither notes nor outlines; instead they're fully composed and selective "narrative nuclei." "The Event Horizon," which opens the book, forms the basis for the film's prologue, and the four stories—appearing in the book in a different sequence—are "Story of a Love Affair That Never Existed," "The Girl, the Crime . . .," "Don't Try to Find Me," and "This Body of Filth." All four are about sexual encounters between a man and a woman who are strangers—though other characters also figure in "Don't Try to Find Me," the story that's been changed the most—and the encounters alternate between failed and successful. The first and last couples fail to get it on; the second and third succeed gloriously. The first two episodes also take place on opposite sides of northern Italy—Ferrara in the east and Portofino on the west coast; and the last two take place on opposite ends of France—Paris in the north and Aix-en-Provence in the south.

There's only one brief segment that can't be traced back to a passage in *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber*—the brief sequence with Jeanne Moreau and Marcello Mastroianni that introduces the final story. If I'm not mistaken, this is one of the few segments directed by Wenders, and the topic is a meditation on the implications of Wenders's involvement in the film—a self-reflexive interlude inspired by the fact that Wenders is trying to imitate Antonioni's style in the portions of the film he directs.

Mastroianni and Moreau were the stars of Antonioni's 1961 feature *La notte*—the middle film in the trilogy that began with *L'avventura* and ended with *Eclipse*—so their presence constitutes a reference to his earlier work. On a mountaintop, Moreau approaches Mastroianni, who's working on a painting that's a pastiche of one of Cézanne's most famous canvases of Mont Sainte-Victoire, and wonders aloud, in French, "why our society needs all these copies of things. I'm speaking not only of copies of paintings, but copies of everything." Mastroianni winds up telling her that the desire to repeat the precise gesture of a great artist is what mainly motivates him.

An overlapping dissolve from Mastroianni's canvas to a reproduction of the Cézanne painting he was emulating brings us to the lobby of a hotel in Aix-en-Provence, where Malkovich is looking at the reproduction and Moreau is seated nearby, reading a book by Doris Lessing. A moment later, seeing Malkovich cross his arms in imitation of the model in another Cézanne reproduction, a portrait of a peasant, she playfully prompts Malkovich's movements, in English: "No, the other arm, underneath. Tilt your head to the right. A little sadder. That's it."

It's a complex little pirouette on the auteur theory, all the more teasing be-

cause one can't say with certainty who is imitating whom. (As a witty riff on postmodernist imitation, it certainly beats the entirety of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.) Wenders may be directing here in a pastiche of Antonioni's style, but is this scene simply Wenders imitating Antonioni, or Antonioni imitating Wenders imitating Antonioni, or some combination thereof? And what role, if any, does cowriter Tonino Guerra play? If Antonioni is being equated with Cézanne, is this his own immodesty or is it the flattery of Wenders or Guerra?

It's fortunate that we can't answer these questions, because any resolution would diminish the meaning—as is generally true of Antonioni's work. In fact, much of the power of the two Italian portions of the film, both of which register like mysterious fairy tales, lies in their quizzicality—seen in the inscrutable nature of a young man named Sylvano (Kim Rossi-Stuart) in the first and of a young woman who's never named (Sophie Marceau) in the second.

The young woman in Portofino is followed by Malkovich down a lovely winding street into a seaside clothing store where she works; later on she approaches him in a nearby café to inform him that she killed her father, stabbing him a dozen times; and, still later, the two of them make love in his hotel room. What's inscrutable isn't only her character—why she killed her father, why she tells Malkovich about it, why they make love—but the nature of his subsequent brooding reflections on the encounter as raw material for a future movie, which end with a reference to James Joyce's "The Dead." The title of the original story contains an ellipsis ("The Girl, the Crime . . ."), which is emblematic of Antonioni's style and method—the three dots are every bit as representative of the episode as "the girl" and "the crime"; in this respect, among others, Antonioni can be seen as an unexpected blood brother of Ernst Lubitsch (who's evoked in the film's final sequence).

The inscrutable nature of Sylvano is tied to Ferrara—"It's a strange story only for those who weren't natives of this city, like me," Malkovich notes offscreen; "Story of a Love Affair That Never Existed" is the only one of the four stories in *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber* whose location is stated by name. ("The Girl, the Crime . . ." is set in "a small town at the foot of a very green mountain, forming a semicircle around a tiny bay of white boats," which in the film becomes Portofino; the settings of the two French episodes are less specific.)

Sylvano, a water-pump technician, is driving through Ferrara quite by chance and asks Carmen (Ines Sastre), a schoolteacher on a bike, for advice about a nearby hotel, which she winds up checking into as well. After a brief flirtation in the hotel's restaurant—he grazes her neck with his lips—they go for a walk under the same arcades where they met, and their mutual attraction is palpable. But

when they return to the hotel, he leaves her and goes to his own room. They both spend a sleepless night waiting for something that never happens.

When they meet by chance again a couple of years later, at a screening of Nikita Mikhalkov's *Urga*, they're both living in Ferrara, and they come much closer to having sex. She lets him into her apartment; but when he tries to kiss her she pulls away, and he leaves. Lingering outside, he looks back at her flat, returns, and she lets him in again. There's a cut to them both nearly undressed on her bed exchanging shy caresses; he moves his hand over her entire body without touching it, then does the same thing with his lips—a scene that paradoxically makes one more acutely aware of the warmth of both their bodies than any conventional coupling would. Finally he pulls away from her, dresses, and leaves. She looks out her bathroom window at him as he walks away, and he looks back. Malkovich says, "He went on being in love with that girl whom he never possessed. Either out of stupid pride, or from folly. That quiet folly of his city."

Describing *Beyond the Clouds* as "a lovely farewell work," Gilberto Perez calls it "a film about desire unattainable not because desire is always anxiously unattainable (as Freud and Lacan and all their followers think) but because desire is finally, serenely unattainable to an old man who knows what he will be missing as the world slips away from him." This certainly matches the film's first and last episodes, and I wouldn't call it irrelevant to the film as a whole. Yet looking back at my two favorite Antonioni features, *L'avventura* and *Eclipse*, I note that the first ends with a couple tragically reunited and the second ends with a couple attracted to each other but failing to meet, and it's hard to determine which ending is sadder. For that matter, I'm not even sure which is more erotically potent or meaningful in Antonioni's work, postcoital melancholy or unfulfilled sexual desire. There is so much of both, and both are perceived by Antonioni as mysterious and open-ended states of mind and feeling.

Beyond the Clouds, like *Identification of a Woman* before it, comes closer to pornography in its voyeurism than any of Antonioni's earlier works, but paradoxically it also winds up finding desire even more erotic when it remains unfulfilled—if only because that leaves more imaginative options open. When Sylvano returns to Carmen's flat a second time, I wrote in my notebook, "This is why movies were invented." Like every other Antonioni film, *Beyond the Clouds* can't find anything more voluptuous than ending every sentence with either an ellipsis or a question mark.

—*Chicago Reader*, April 7, 2000

Reality and History as the Apotheosis of Southern Sleaze

Phil Karlson's *The Phenix City Story*

> Karlson pushes and punches, but he's good at it. He can dredge up emotion; he can make the battle of virtuous force against organized evil seem primordial. He has a tawdry streak (there's an exploitation sequence with a nude prostitute being whipped), and he's careless (a scene involving a jewelry salesman is a decrepit mess), but in the onrush of the story the viewer is overwhelmed. . . . One would be tempted to echo Thelma Ritter in *All About Eve*—"Everything but the bloodhounds snappin' at her rear end"—but some of the suffering has a basis in fact. —Pauline Kael on *Walking Tall* (1974)

1. What Qualifies as Real

As an Alabama expatriate who fled north the first chance I could get, I didn't keep my southern accent for long; it fell away, in a matter of months, like dead skin. The fact was—and is—that Alabama accents sound stupid to Yankees; and since I was both a teenager and trying hard to become a Yankee, they eventually began to sound stupid to me. Especially during the civil rights movement, already in full swing by then, having a southern accent, if you were white, made you sound like a racist to some people, regardless of what you said or did. At parties in New York, I would be asked from time to time whether I felt ashamed of coming from Alabama, which would tick me off no end. They also often seemed to think that being Jewish in the South was difficult, not understanding that your family's class could function as a form of protection. My grandfather ran a small chain of movie theaters in the northwestern corner of the state, and my father worked for him; my mother, a model from New York, set about acquiring a Southern accent long before I started divesting myself of my own, pretty much for the same reason. I should have added that the only overt prejudice I ever encountered at that point came from Yankees, for being a white Southerner—or from other white Southerners, for hanging out with blacks.

It was years before I conclusively decided that Florence, Alabama, and I weren't much of a match. But even before I figured that out, one reason why I saw so many movies at my grandfather's theaters was that they took me out of my surroundings. Just the same, I would have appreciated movies that showed something about where I lived—movies that *authenticated* Alabama by showing the

rest of the world what it was like. Metaphysically speaking, the desire to see Alabama on the big screen was really nothing but the desire to feel that I existed in the wider scheme of things. In crude fantasy terms, it entailed starring in an epic that played on Times Square.

Was my desire to see my life blown up to the size of a wall really nothing but the urge to have my Southern existence vindicated? Apart from five Elia Kazan features that took some trouble to have their actors speak with proper Southern accents—*Panic in the Streets* (1950, New Orleans), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951, "New Orleans" as conjured up by studio sets), *Baby Doll* (1956, rural Mississippi), *A Face in the Crowd* (1957, Memphis and environs), and *Wild River* (1960, the Tennessee Valley, my own stomping ground)—the overall record of Hollywood depicting the South with some fidelity was generally abysmal.

Simply to feel that I was part of the world, meaning just another part, wasn't enough for me, who had to have his destiny writ large; and what could offer a better writing pad in the sky than a crummy movie? The problem is, even if some film industry folk are currently removing by digital means images of the World Trade Center from forthcoming movies, the best movie slime merchants of the 1950s were more bent on exploiting rather than censoring all the telltale traces of their audience's traumas—and, to the best of my recollection, no one ever croaked as a consequence.

One perfect example of this tendency to strike while the iron was still hot and when the afterglow was still lurid—spurred on by the fad of shooting cheap noirs and thrillers on locations, which started in the mid-40s with Louis de Rochemont productions like *The House on 92nd Street* and Kazan's *Boomerang*—was an even lower-budget and sleazier black-and-white crime picture seen in October 1955, shot on location in Phenix City, Alabama. Admittedly I've never been there; it's on the other side of the state from Florence, in the southeast—the other side of the moon as far as I was concerned in the mid-50s. I've never even been to the adjacent and much larger Columbus, Georgia, home to Fort Benning, the Army base just across the Chattahoochee River that furnished most of the clientele for Phenix City's bustling gambling joints, bars, strip shows, and brothels. But *The Phenix City Story* looked, sounded, and felt to me like Alabama in 1955, and everyone I knew in Florence who saw the picture agreed.

Today, at least for me, the illusion still holds, and I've always cited this movie as the best ever made in the state, as well as the most authentic. Maybe that's in part because watching it is experiencing the apotheosis of Southern sleaze—a bit like festering for hours in the seediest possible Alabama Greyhound depot in August without air conditioning. Another reason: the movie goads one into emotions of righteous horror and indignation that ultimately make the viewer feel energized, like a potential member of a lynch mob, despite the fact that this movie's politics

are plainly liberal. As Jack Shadoian, the most perceptive commentator about the film, has put it, "The movie makes you want to kill and robs you of the satisfaction"—the latter trait undoubtedly deriving from its liberalism. Phil Karlson, the director, whom I knew nothing about in 1955, was a Chicago-born journeyman who directed Marilyn Monroe in her first starring role, in the 1949 *Ladies of the Chorus*, and later became known as a specialist in paranoid crime thrillers. (Shadoian is probably right in singling out *99 River Street* and *The Phenix City Story* as the two best examples of this subgenre, though the subsequent *Walking Tall*—which resembles the latter in many particulars, especially when it comes to turning the viewer into a liberal-minded fascist—was by far his biggest hit.)

Yet all I knew about Phenix City before or after seeing the movie, at least until recently, was precisely what the movie was about: the assassination of the Alabama attorney general Albert Patterson—who'd just been elected on a platform of cleaning up crime in Phenix City and who was shot down in the street before he could take office. By reputation, Phenix City was already one of the most corrupt towns in the country, run by mobsters who were terrorizing the citizens, but the shooting of Patterson made this corruption impossible to avoid.

I was eleven at the time, spending the night at my grandparents' house, watching something like *Our Miss Brooks* or *The Life of Riley* with my grandfather, when an announcement of the murder interrupted the show. I can remember my grandfather telling me the next morning he hadn't slept all night—the same reaction he'd have nearly three years later, September 1957, when Bart Floyd, a prospective Klan captain just outside of Birmingham, decided to prove his mettle by castrating a Negro "boy" at random, settling on a thirty-four-year-old housepainter, Judge Edward Aaron. Maybe it's hard for some to remember this now, but these events were comparable in certain ways to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks; both left a raw feeling in the gut that said all bets were off, that anything could happen because men were capable of that kind of indifference to suffering. And it had military consequences in 1954 as well as forty-seven years later: back then, it meant imposing martial law on Phenix City and sending in soldiers.

Then, only sixteen months after Patterson was gunned down, along came a movie about it. *The Phenix City Story* had a two-day run at the Shoals—the largest of my grandfather's theaters, with 1,350 seats—on Sunday and Monday, October 23 and 24, preceding a three-day run of *Land of the Pharaohs.* To give a slightly wider sense of context, this was a month after comparable runs of *The Prodigal* ("MGM's mighty spectacle of a city of sin!" promised the ads) and *Kiss Me, Deadly*—and two months after *Blackboard Jungle* and Fritz Lang's *Moonfleet* ("FURY of a pirate leader! FIRE of a gypsy woman!"). Sort of an even spread, one

might say, between contemporary Sodoms and Gomorrahs on the one hand, sadistic versions of history and antiquity on the other.

Not counting the precredits newsreel (an essential part of the movie, regrettably missing from some prints), the first signifier of "reality" in *The Phenix City Story*—occurring just after the credits appear over a spread of weekly magazines—is a printed rolling title whose authenticity seems guaranteed by its naïveté. An outright grammatical error in the first sentence, "There is no other place in the world as Phenix City, Alabama," is followed by a quaint allusion to antiquity in the next two:

> For almost one hundred years it has been the modern Pompeii where vice and corruption were the order of the day. Unlike Pompeii it did not require a Vesuvius to destroy it, for Phenix City is now a model community—orderly—progressive—and a tribute to the freedom loving peoples everywhere.

2. What Qualifies as History

> Karlson brings to his film an element of sordid horror. His environments are noisy, crowded, fetid. The sky over Phenix City is gray and dismal. The musical number at the Poppy Club ["Phenix City Blues"] is an anti-number, coarse, unprofessional, talentless. A dead child is thrown from a car onto a lawn. Voters, men and women, are beaten up at the polls and stagger into the street, dripping blood. The "heroine" gets killed, as does her pleasant young suitor. A crippled lawyer [Albert Patterson] is shot in the mouth. One almost can't believe what is happening on the screen; the horror of it suffocates.
>
> Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends* (1977)

It sounds hyperbolic, but most of this, I've recently discovered, actually happened in real life: not the dead child—a black girl, to be precise—tossed onto a lawn; but the beaten-up voters and some of the other murders are accurate. To emphasize the point, the movie even starts off with the aforementioned sensationalist newsreel, which features interviews with several inhabitants of Phenix City—veritable hayseeds all, to judge by their accents, provoking varying degrees of merriment or impatience for audiences inside as well as outside the South. Shadoian, clearly a Yankee and city slicker, rather easily concludes that "however sincere, the real people of Phenix City are awfully dull."[1] The newsreel and movie proper were both being made around the same time Albert Patterson's murder trial was unfolding. This wasn't long after Albert's son, John (played in the movie by Richard Kiley) was himself elected attorney general on his father's platform, but at the

time of his father's death he was just back from Germany, where he worked at the Nuremberg trials, planning to join his father's law office. Eventually Patterson the younger became governor of the state—I played with my high-school band at his inauguration in Montgomery.

Anyway, dull or not—and for me these folks weren't dull at all, just awkward and non-Hollywood—I can recall some particularly loud guffaws at the Shoals when one of the locals was interviewed in the newsreel section. Quinnie Kelley—janitor at the Russell County courthouse, deputy sheriff, and a witness in one of the current murder trials, whose wife was so scared she was seeing a doctor about it—is asked, "You carry a gun?" and he replies, "Yeah Ah carry a gun," followed by, "You know how to use it?" and "Yeah Ah know how to use it," then "*Will* you use it?" and "Yeah Al use it"—all his responses delivered with the same lack of inflection.

There were further yucks, too, when Hugh Britton—one of the real-life crusaders against Phenix City's crime and corruption, portrayed in the film by George Mitchell—imparts a piece of folk wisdom while unobtrusively whittling a piece of wood: "When I was a boy we just for a pastime at night used to take flashlights and broomsticks and go down to the city dump to hunt rats—kill some big ones. And . . . [fumbling as he searches for words] if you turn a light, a bright light, in a rat's face, he'll run for cover—and it doesn't make any difference if that rat is in the city dump or in the city hall."

More than anything else, what these local voices and accents brought to the movie was a sense of banality that provides a chilling counterpoint to the atrocities being revealed. Perhaps the key moment of desperate hopelessness in the movie occurs when the young woman Shadoian identifies as the heroine (played by Kathryn Grant, who would marry Bing Crosby only two years later) rushes with her boyfriend's father (Truman Smith) from the city hall to the hospital after hearing that her boyfriend, Fred (Biff McGuire), was taken there after having been found in a ditch outside town, unconscious but alive. The short-haired woman behind the hospital reception desk says to the two of them, "There's just one formality—you know the red tape in a hospital. Where do you want us to send the body? What mortuary?" Once she sees the shock that has registered in their eyes, she tonelessly adds, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Forgive me. I thought you knew—you see, he was dead on arrival."

The woman intoning these lines is clearly not a professional actor, sincere but stiff in her carefully enunciated Alabama delivery—carefully splitting the word "forgive" into separate syllables as if speaking to a child. The fact that she doesn't even know how to make her lines dramatic in any conventional way conjures up a kind of reality to the awful information she's conveying, a kind of everyday unseemliness that has stayed with me for most of my life.

Apparently the passion for verisimilitude in *The Phenix City Story* went much further than using local people. According to Karlson's entry in Ephraim Katz's *Film Encyclopedia*, the director, who "during the course of filming . . . uncovered new evidence that helped convict the murder suspects," also had John McIntire, who played Albert Patterson, "wear the same clothes the dead man had actually worn at the time of the murder." (As an aid to Method acting, as some kind of tribal talisman, or as a grim sort of joke? Katz doesn't say.)

It would be fair to add that the movie made a big impression in 1955, especially in Alabama. (Though I doubt it played on Times Square, it seems pretty likely that it made it to 42nd Street.) Yet apparently it made no imprint at all on Margaret Anne Barnes when, forty-odd years later, in 1998, she wrote *The Tragedy and Triumph of Phenix City, Alabama* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press), a book about the same events. More precisely, the impact it had, if any, is apparently subliminal, because the book's frontispiece—which purports to be a photograph of Albert Patterson during his fatal campaign and which shows a man standing with a cane, flanked by two posters that read, "VOTE FOR ALBERT L. PATTERSON ATTORNEY GENERAL"—is actually a photograph of John McIntire as he appears in the movie. So maybe at least the suit is authentic, but the man isn't. Yet some 120 pages further into the book, the photograph appears a second time, this time directly across from another full-page photograph—this other one of the real Albert Patterson, who looks substantially different (especially his nose), sitting in his living room while he and his wife (who appears in the movie's newsreel) listen on their radio console to the voting returns in the May 4, 1954, primary election.

How could Barnes—an informed and informative local historian, whose overall veracity is thrown into question only when she quotes verbatim entire conversations from the mid-50s and who in fact serves as my main factual source here—have failed to notice such a howler? How could she be completely unaware of Karlson's movie, or else so indifferent or hostile to it that she doesn't mention it once in her 319 pages? One clue: both photographs on these facing pages are labeled "Courtesy of the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*," which suggests that both must have come from the same newspaper file, surely an equalizing process in some respects. I'm reminded of the closing intertitle of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon:* "Good or bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, they are all equal now." And to be fair to Barnes, who indicates in her dedication that she was ill when she wrote this volume ("To my two physicians . . . who kept me alive long enough to finish this book"), a half-hour video produced in 2000 by the University of Alabama's Center for Public Television and Radio, *Up from the Ashes: The Rebirth of Phenix City*, commits the same error of misidentifying the very same photograph, despite the fact that the video mentions the movie and even includes clips from it.

The Phenix City Story isn't available for sale or rental on video, and it's not out

on DVD, so you have to take my word for it—just as the movie pretty much says you have to take its own word for it. Maybe this movie qualifies as history, but if it isn't out there on the market, it no longer belongs to history in any practical sense.[2]

I think there's a lesson here somewhere. And I'm afraid it's a lesson that rebounds on me even more than on Barnes or the makers of *Up from the Ashes*, because I've recently discovered something ghastly about my own memory: that every time I try to imagine what John Patterson looked like, I can remember only Richard Kiley, even though I must have seen Patterson on TV and in newspaper photos countless times while he was governor. Is this because a movie's so-called realism counts for more in the final analysis than the reality it purports to depict? Maybe, but the movie's partly to blame for this, because it ends with a shot of Kiley—not Patterson—seated at Patterson's desk in what's supposed to be his attorney general's office in Montgomery (though it is almost certainly a set), speaking directly to the camera just as the real Patterson would have if Karlson had enlisted him to speak the film's closing cautionary/inspirational words. ("With God's help, I shall not fail.") And this confused me so much when I was thirteen that I've remained confused about John Patterson ever since.

3. Coda: What Makes a Movie—or This One, Anyway

In short, it isn't just good actors as well as the use of locals and nonprofessionals that make *The Phenix City Story* seem real; it's also the mixture and occasional confusion between the two. My favorite scene in the film, which is especially overt about this ambiguity, is also one of the very first: Rhett Tanner (played by Edward Andrews)—owner of the Poppy Club and a fictional counterpart of one or more of the main local crooks—travels across downtown Phenix City from his clip joint, first by foot and then by car, to pay a visit to his old "pal" Albert Patterson, who hasn't yet decisively turned against the local mob and who, like the real Patterson, served as their attorney in various trials. En route, we see such details as prostitutes on the street plying their trade with soldiers from Fort Benning while Tanner makes various kinds of small talk with many of the people he passes on the street: Ma Beachie, the real-life, grandmotherly proprietor of one of the other clubs; one of his own employees, Mack, who alerts him, via a spy, to news about a secret antimob meeting scheduled for that evening; Mr. Seymour, a member of Tanner's church, who chats with him briefly about the Sunday sermon he just missed. (The subject? You guessed it—Sodom and Gomorrah.) It turns out that Tanner is more evil than anyone else in *The Phenix City Story*, but in this early scene Andrews and Karlson's fleet direction make him likable as well as credible—a good ol' boy making some of his daily rounds as good-naturedly as

possible. That's partly what made the film so believably Southern. And what made it believably contemporary as well as Southern was the racist killing of a little black girl to scare the Pattersons away from challenging the mob—an incident that I only recently figured out must have been invented. I have no idea whether this addition can be attributed to Crane Wilbur, the screenwriter credited with the Phenix City documentation, or to Dan Mainwaring—an old Hollywood pro best known for adapting his own novel *Build My Gallows High* into the script for *Out of the Past* under the name Geoffrey Holmes, then for adapting *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* from Jack Finney's novel the year after *The Phenix City Story*. (Judging by these two latter scripts, he may have been, not counting Karlson himself, the consummate master of conveying 50s paranoia.)

But whoever worked the racial angle into the script knew what he was doing and was even somewhat prescient about it. The film was released less than eighteen months after racial segregation was ruled unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, but this was still over a month before Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus, thereby launching the civil rights movement. Yet the nonviolent activist position of Martin Luther King Jr. that first became widely known during that protest is already implicitly present in this movie, in the fictional character of Zeke Ward (James Edwards—an actor already familiar from his roles in *Home of the Brave* and *The Steel Helmet*). Zeke is a black man who sweeps up at the Poppy Club, loses his job there after he helps John Patterson escape from a violent skirmish (a fistfight with one of Tanner's lackeys), and is the father of the little girl subsequently slain by Tanner's henchmen and thrown on the Pattersons' front lawn. (After an effective hysterical scene with John trying to calm his sobbing wife and kids, we get the chillingly indifferent response of a fat cop to the news when it's phoned in to the station house. Turning dully to another cop, he says, "Somebody threw a dead nigger kid on Patterson's lawn; go out and have a look." This prompted more hoots from the Shoals—though probably more in disbelief at this callousness than anything else, and almost surely not from the "colored balcony.")

Much later in the film—in what qualifies as the action climax—Patterson, after finding the dead body of Kathryn Grant's character inside Ward's shack, catches up with evil mobster Tanner and beats him half to death in a muddy swamp. But Ward, the only black character of consequence in the film, pulls Patterson away from Tanner before he can actually kill him, persuading him to hold off, citing the same words his wife has just used to keep Ward himself from shooting Tanner: " 'Thou shalt not kill,' the Lord said." So properly speaking it's Zeke and his wife, not the movie per se, who deprive us of the satisfaction of committing murder. (But just to make sure the movie doesn't alienate us bloodthirsty spectators entirely, John Patterson has already just promised an angry

crowd downtown in the previous scene that if the law doesn't take care of his father's killer, he'll do it himself.)

It's worth noting that this movie was probably written before Wilbur or Mainwaring ever heard of Martin Luther King Jr. It's also worth stressing that a movie of this kind could apparently play across the south in 1955 without any threat of censorship—unlike, say, *Baby Doll* the following year, which my father booked in spite of a threatened boycott from the Catholic church, or *Island in the Sun* two years later, which he didn't dare book because a faintly implied romantic interest between Harry Belafonte and Joan Fontaine was enough to drive some people around the bend. (As I recall, an exhibitor in Huntsville who tried to show it got his theater firebombed.) And certainly no one objected to *The Defiant Ones* in 1958—an arty Stanley Kramer parable about two escaped southern convicts chained together, Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier, which curiously elicited only howls of laughter when I saw it in Florence, as if the audience were watching a Three Stooges comedy. (Would the same thing have happened if the Colonel had allowed Elvis to costar in the movie with Sammy Davis Jr., as both actors wanted? Hard to say.) So it was sex, or sex in conjunction with race, not race alone, that generally got banned in Southern moviehouses in the 50s—and not even that when it came to Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (perhaps because Universal cautiously cast a white actress, Susan Kohner, as a black character passing for white).

The Phenix City Story could get around easily in the mid-50s because it was basically a B-film—not in the original sense of that term, as the lower half of a double bill that played with an A-picture, but as a low-budget movie that was less an event than part of an overall flow, the way that TV or the Internet is today. So when film critic Todd McCarthy asked me to write about this movie for a collection he was coediting in the early 70s called *Kings of the Bs*—before the release of Karlson's somewhat similar *Walking Tall*, his biggest hit—it was a logical choice for such a book.

Unfortunately I had to turn him down. But now that I'm fulfilling the assignment for another editor almost three decades later, I can only account for my forty-six-year-old obsession with this film by acknowledging my preference for the realistic over the real. Maybe this is because the former can tell everybody what Alabama is really like, but the latter can't.

—*The Oxford-American*, no. 42 (Winter 2002)

NOTES

1. In fact, I'm cheating a bit here. I met Shadoian once—probably long before he ever got involved with film studies—when my Manhattan cousin, David, a jazz buff like

me, took me along with him one evening to visit a friend in one of the outer boroughs who also loved Bird, Lennie Tristano, and Warne Marsh, and even took out his tenor sax at one point to play along with one of his records. Years later, David identified this friend as Jack Shadoian, author of *Dreams and Dead Ends*.

2. This is why I can't summon up much patience for fellow film reviewers who hold forth on "the state of cinema," foreign *or* domestic, because most things are always unavailable. The fact is, much of what's available is arbitrary, because the studios and distributors handling this stuff don't generally know what they have; they tend to buy and sell several titles in bunches, regarding individual films the way other wheeler-dealers might regard separate lengths of pipe.

Is Ozu Slow?

The following is a lecture delivered at a symposium, "Yasujiro Ozu in the World," organized by Shigehiko Hasumi in Tokyo on December 11, 1998. The other participants, apart from Hasumi himself, were critic Jean Douchet (the keynote speaker), Hou Hsiao-hsien and his screenwriter, Chu Tien-wen, and critic Thierry Jousse.

I'd like to preface these remarks by citing a moment from Ozu's *I Was Born, But . . .* (1932) and the particular significance it has for me. During the home movie projection that marks the critical turning point in the film from comedy to tragedy, and shortly before the clowning of the father in front of his boss appears in one of the home movies, the father's two little boys start having a debate about the zebra they see on the screen—does it have black stripes on white or white stripes on black?—creating a disturbance that momentarily halts the screening. In comparable fashion, a spurious, distracting, and no less innocent debate has persisted about Ozu for years: is he a realist or a formalist? What seems lamentable about this debate is that it fails to perceive that cinematic forms and social forms are not alternatives in the world of Ozu but opposite sides of the same coin, so that it should be impossible to speak about one without speaking about the other. I regard this fact as the linchpin of my argument, and I hope that the remainder of my discussion will bear this out.

I was recently having dinner at one of my favorite Chinese restaurants in Chicago, where the waiter happens to be a passionate cinephile. While taking my order, the waiter was telling me about his enthusiasm for Tsai Ming-liang, and when I mentioned that I would be speaking shortly about Yasujiro Ozu in Tokyo, he said to me, "I don't know about Ozu. His films are so slow." The following remarks are an attempt to respond to his comment.

My first response is to say that some of Ozu's silent films—in particular, *I Was Born, But . . .*, one of my favorites—aren't very slow at all, and it's symptomatic of the limitations of global film culture today that silent cinema is often ruled out of order in advance. But my second response is to ask what we mean when we call a film slow—an adjective that's frequently pejorative, even when it's used in relation to films by Robert Bresson, Carl Dreyer, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Abbas Kiarostami, F. W. Murnau, Ozu, Jacques Rivette, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet,

Andrei Tarkovsky, and Jacques Tati, among others. And to pose this question with particular reference to Japanese culture, I'd like to introduce a couple of hypotheses.

One of these hypotheses comes from a provocative short essay by Karlheinz Stockhausen called "Ceremonial Japan" that I first read in the October 25, 1974, issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* a quarter of a century ago. Exploring his fascination with a diverse variety of Japanese ceremonial forms—the Noh theater, Omizutori (the Water Consecration Festival), Sumo wrestling, and the tea ceremony—Stockhausen has the following to say about what he calls Japanese timing:

> Where timing is concerned, the European is absolutely mediocre. Which means he has settled down somewhere in the middle of his range of potential tempi. It is a very narrow range, compared with the extremely fast reactions that a Japanese might have at a certain moment, and to the extremely slow reaction that he might show on another occasion. He has a poor middle range compared to the European.

Stockhausen also implies that this distinction is in danger of being effaced or at least eroded by the Westernization and Americanization of Japan. This is a delicate matter, because we know from the persuasive arguments in Shigehiko Hasumi's book on Ozu, *Yasujiro Ozu* (available in its entirety only in Japanese and French, though the beautiful final chapter, "Sunny Skies," can be found in David Desser's 1997 collection of critical pieces devoted to *Tokyo Story*, published by Cambridge University Press), that Ozu's work also reflects to some degree the impact of America on Japanese culture. But because Hasumi is a Japanese critic looking at American influence and I'm an American critic looking at Japanese elements, we see things with a somewhat different emphasis. In any case, I would like to suggest—and this is my second hypothesis—that the fast reactions in Japanese spectators implied in Ozu's filmmaking practice often correspond to standing and walking and that the slow reactions implied in his filmmaking practice often correspond to sitting.

What do I mean by this? The elements in *I Was Born, But . . .* that I identify as fast—in particular, the brevity of certain still shots of locations and the speed of certain camera movements—can be linked to either an implied standing spectator or an implied walking spectator, and when the camera movements follow characters who are walking, the speed of the characters and the implied speed of the spectators watching them are clearly linked. Similarly, the elements in the film that I identify as slow mainly occur when characters are seated.

Now it's obvious that most of us watch films while we're seated. But just because it's obvious doesn't mean that it isn't worthy of some reflection—and

reflection, after all, is something else that's often best done while we're sitting. Yet the artificial sensation of speed that characterizes so much of contemporary commercial cinema, American cinema in particular—the speed of fast cars and explosions and what we call "action," not to mention the speed of much TV editing, all of which tends to make Ozu seem "conservative" and "old-fashioned" by comparison—tends to deny this fact, to operate as if we were literally watching films on the run, without any opportunities for reflection.

Ozu's acknowledgment that we watch films while sitting seems to me a fundamental aspect of his style, and a great deal that is considered difficult or problematical or simply "slow" in his style derives from this essential fact. As a rule, characters in Ozu films are seated when they eat and when they converse. In *I Was Born, But . . .* , the two little boys who are the central characters are mainly seen on their feet, but early in the film they are seated when they have breakfast, when they put on their shoes before leaving their house, and then when they decide to skip school and have their lunch in a field. They are also seated when they attend school the following day, when they watch home movies at the home of the father's boss, and later, after their fight with their father, when they refuse to eat. All of these occasions might be described as times of relative reflection.

But this is a film in which social behavior and social conditioning are at least as important as reflection, and the issue of speed is relevant to all three activities. Early in the film, after the boys skip school out of fear of getting beaten up and have their lunch in the field, one of the brothers reminds the other, "We're supposed to get an A in writing today." Soon afterward they both stand up to finish their lunch on their feet, an action that implies, as much else in the film does, that getting ahead in the world requires alertness and motion, both of which are usually more obtainable from a standing position.

As if to demonstrate this point, the film then cuts to the other boys at school standing at attention in the school yard and following the instructions of a teacher to turn and then to march in a military fashion. The camera remains stationary during most of this activity, but then, as the boys march briskly past the camera from right to left, the camera begins to track rapidly in the reverse direction, from left to right. Then there is a cut to another rapid left-to-right track in the office where the boys' father works—a famous shot, moving at the same speed past workers at a row of desks, some of them seated and some standing. Each worker yawns as if on cue just as the camera passes him, except for one, until the camera moves back to him in the reverse direction, stops, and waits for him to yawn as well; as soon as he does, the camera resumes the same rapid left-to-right movement past other workers, all of whom yawn on cue. This is a rather exceptional modernist moment in Ozu's work because it equates his own position of power as a director with the power of the state—specifically, with the power of the school

and the office, the two principal zones of authority in the film apart from the more indeterminate zones of the field (ruled by the boys) and the house (ruled by the father). Significantly, it is in the field and in the house where conflict breaks out in the film—not in the school or in the office, where the laws of behavior are more absolute—and by drawing a parallel based on speed and motion between the school and the office, and focusing comically in both locations on individuals who fail to conform, Ozu is providing a particular context for the conflicts that arise elsewhere. Furthermore, by drawing an explicit parallel between the authority exerted by his camera and the authority exerted by the school and the office, Ozu is explicitly positing an important relationship between cinematic forms and social forms, a relationship that carries a great deal of meaning throughout his work.

In contrast to *I Was Born, But . . .*, *Tokyo Story* (1953) can correctly be identified as a slow film—not because Ozu is imposing an external formal structure on his material but because the central characters he is concerned with are an elderly couple whose movements are slow and who are seen sitting more often than standing. Somewhat faster movements are associated with their children in Tokyo, who are too busy with their lives to spend much time with their parents, but on the whole this is a film geared more to the movements of the parents than to the movements of the younger generations. Significantly, the single element in the film that is most associated with speed—the trains that carry the parents from Onomichi to Tokyo, from Tokyo to Atami and back, from Tokyo to Osaka, and then from Osaka back to Onomichi—are never seen. The trains in motion that we do see are most often details in landscape shots that function rather like musical accents, comparable to the moving boats in the Onomichi harbor and the moth fluttering against a lamp while the mother is dying; these accents are emblems of speed and motion that serve to throw into relief the relative stasis that surrounds them.

The most pertinent exception to this rule is the moving train carrying Noriko, the parents' daughter-in-law, back to Tokyo from Onomichi near the end of the film—a train viewed externally as the main focus of two successive shots before we see Noriko seated inside in the third, examining the mother's watch that the father has just given her as a keepsake. Time is a central preoccupation of *Tokyo Story*, which helps to explain not only why the ticking of a clock is one of the last things we hear on the soundtrack but also why this speeding train and this watch are highlighted shortly before the end. If speed in *I Was Born, But . . .* is often associated with struggle and desperation because it plays against the slowness associated with reflection and recognition, speed in *Tokyo Story* becomes associ-

ated with hope in relation to the figure of Noriko, if only because we're led to believe that she represents the possibility of change in relation to the future.

Judging by David Bordwell's quantitative analysis of Ozu's films, which appears as an appendix to his *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1988), *Tokyo Story* is probably not Ozu's slowest film. We learn from this chart that there are 1,371 shots in *I Was Born, But . . .* and 786 shots in *Tokyo Story*, whereas *There Was a Father* (1942), which I'm less familiar with, is the surviving Ozu feature with the smallest number of shots, 353. Moreover, whereas the average shot length of *I Was Born, But . . .* is 4.0 seconds and the average shot length of *Tokyo Story* is more than two and half times longer, 10.2 seconds, the average shot length of *There Was a Father* is 14.8 seconds. I'm somewhat skeptical of how many generalizations can be reached through this kind of quantitative analysis, especially when it encompasses silent as well as sound films and when the presence of intertitles alters our sense of what a shot consists of. But one could at least surmise from Bordwell's figures that *Tokyo Story* is typical of Ozu's late manner without necessarily representing an extreme.

Yet at the same time, *Good Morning* (1959), another relatively late film, alters the rules of the game we have been playing up to now regarding speed. It contains 819 shots and has an average shot length of 7.0 seconds, which would appear to make it slower than *I Was Born, But . . .* and faster than *Tokyo Story*. But in fact Ozu's editing and mise en scène in *Good Morning* can't really be assigned to that middle range of tempi described by Stockhausen, a range he argued that Japanese spectators are less comfortable with.

If, broadly speaking, *I Was Born, But . . .* can be characterized as fast and *Tokyo Story* can be characterized as slow, *Good Morning* can't be properly described as either. More concerned with coexistence and interaction than with conflict and separation, it is in fact one of the most complex Ozu films in terms of rhythm and tempo. In most scenes one finds characters who are seated as well as characters who are standing, just as most of the "static" shots of locations also feature people walking past. There's scarcely more "action" in this film than there is in *Tokyo Story*, yet the overall movement from character to character and from scene to scene is brisk throughout. Although I can't speak with any authority about Japanese sitcoms in the 50s, I would imagine that they bear some resemblance to American sitcoms of the same period. If I'm correct about this, I would guess that Ozu is consciously borrowing from this form, which means that television is central not only to the plot of *Good Morning* but also to its narrative structure.

Despite many thematic echoes of *I Was Born, But . . .* in *Good Morning*, the two films are in fact quite different. Structured on the formal as well as social equivalence between schoolboy farting contests, the small talk of a couple, and the greetings between neighbors, and concerned with what might be called the

architecture of everyday social interactions, *Good Morning* combines speed with slowness in numerous ways—not only in the overall progression of the narrative but in many individual details, such as the image of the younger brother playing with his hula hoop, which involves him standing relatively still and shaking his hips very rapidly at the same time.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that speed is relative—all the more so in a film where coexistence and relativity are central to the style as well as the subject. For this reason, we can't answer the question, "Is Ozu slow?" in a single way. The work is too rich and too varied for such a question to have any meaning. Indeed, it's part of the function of the greatest artists to dissolve such questions, or at the very least transform them into other questions. For what finally matters most in Ozu is not how slow or fast he is but how slow or fast we are in keeping up with him.

—*Senses of Cinema* (Australian Web site), no. 4 (2000)

The Human Touch

Decalogue and *Fargo*

One way of judging the importance of filmmakers is by looking at the kind of talk they generate among their audiences. Since the recent death of the fifty-four-year-old Krzysztof Kieslowski during open-heart surgery, one of the key points of speculation about him is whether he knew when he announced his retirement a couple of years ago that he had a heart condition. As evidence that he did, one could cite the fact that the "twin" Polish and French heroines of his *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991) suffer from heart conditions, and one ultimately dies from hers; as evidence that he didn't, one could note that Kieslowski was a heavy smoker and continued to smoke after his announcement (though he may have been simply reckless). And prior to his last heart attack he'd begun work with his longtime collaborator, Krzysztof Piesiewicz, on a script for a new trilogy structured around the themes of heaven, hell, and purgatory—not necessarily in that order.[1] A deeply controversial filmmaker on both sides of the Atlantic, Kieslowski can't be deemed a greater or lesser figure on the basis of what he knew about his heart, but perhaps it isn't a coincidence that his attitudes toward his characters are frequently ambiguous, the issues they raise never closed.

Kieslowski's ten-part 1988 Polish miniseries, *The Decalogue*—a work that can easily be seen piecemeal, because the films don't depend on one another for their principal meanings—should be judged to some extent by the quality of the discussions it provokes about ethics. Each 50-odd-minute film recounts a story set in contemporary Warsaw in which a character breaks one of the Ten Commandments in some fashion, though Kieslowski is too cagey to identify overtly which commandment goes with which story or to explain other connections—such as why the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," is represented by a story in which neither of the principal characters is married. His use of a different cinematographer on all but two of the ten films also makes each story a separate stylistic adventure, especially in terms of light and color. The greatest source of unity may be that nearly all the major characters live in the same housing project, so that major characters in one film are apt to reappear as minor characters in one or more others. ("It's the most beautiful housing estate in Warsaw, which is why I chose it," Kieslowski once said, typically adding, "it looks pretty awful, so you can imagine what the others are like.") As another example of

this kind of fascinating crossover—*The Decalogue* has several—the central ethical dilemma faced by a hospital consultant (Aleksander Bardini) in the second film is recounted as part of a university lecture in the eighth.

All of the films in *The Decalogue* are easy and pleasurable to follow as stories, yet part of the excitement they generate stems from discussions about their meaning after their dramatic impact registers. As Stanley Kubrick pointed out five years ago in his brief foreword to the published script of *The Decalogue*, Kieslowski and Piesiewicz "have the very rare ability to dramatize their ideas rather than just talk about them. By making their points through the dramatic action of the story they gain the added power of allowing the audience to discover what's really going on rather than being told. . . . You never see the ideas coming." Interestingly, postscreening discussions tend to be exegetical without ever becoming religious; some critics' patter to the contrary, Kieslowski belongs to the agnostic Bergman camp, not to the mystical Tarkovsky one.

The Decalogue harks back to a notion of conceptual art movie that reeks of the 60s—specifically, zeitgeist filmmakers like Antonioni, Godard, and occasionally Resnais—even though it's exploring everyday urban life in the late 80s. The film can be comfortably situated in neither the Polish context of the Kieslowski features that precede it nor the Eurobabble New Age mysticism of the international coproductions that follow it (*The Double Life of Veronique*, *Blue*, *White*, and *Red*.) (However, it's worth noting that there's at least one intertextual detail that links the work of both periods: the imaginary Dutch classical composer Van der Brudenmajer, alluded to throughout the "Three Colors" trilogy as a kind of running gag, is first mentioned in the ninth film of *The Decalogue*.)

By way of contrast, a central point of postscreening discussions about *Fargo*, a Coen brothers crime story about a botched kidnapping set in wintertime Minnesota and North Dakota, is whether this story is based on fact, as it claims to be—discussions that invariably lead nowhere. "This is a true story," states an extended title at the beginning, which goes on to explain that the events took place in 1987 (coincidentally, around the same time that *The Decalogue* was being scripted), that at the request of the survivors the names of the characters have been changed, but "out of respect for the dead" everything else in the film is true. This being a Coen brothers movie, one's likely to scoff or smirk at such a claim, but even if one doesn't the last thing on the end credits—"No similarity to actual persons living or dead is intended or should be inferred"—surely deserves a smirk of its own.

However, I don't think anyone in the general audience who sees *Fargo*—and that includes me—cares in the slightest whether any of the events actually occurred, regardless of how one feels about the movie. The opening and closing titles are strictly pro forma, and the same could be said for the movie's characters—though this is the Coen brothers in a hyperrealist mode, meaning that the

characters are at least superficially more realistic than those in any previous Coen brothers feature.

The abrasive caricatures in the Coen brothers' work, not to mention the low-angle Steadicam dollies they often favor, periodically remind me of Kubrick and his combinations of misanthropy and seamless technique—but the thematic differences are crucial. Virtually all of Kubrick's features concentrate on elaborate, ingenious control systems that ultimately spin wildly out of control. (After the opening section in *Full Metal Jacket*, it's the narrative itself that goes haywire, though most critics—with the rare exception of Bill Krohn in *Cahiers du cinéma*—saw this as a failing rather than as a radical, meaningful artistic strategy.) In *Fargo* there's no ingenious control system to dismantle; the kidnapping plot that sets everything else in motion is harebrained, and no part of it is carried out with any precision, so all that one can observe is an ugly, messy situation that becomes progressively uglier and messier—particularly since it's juxtaposed with the unvarying forbearance of the pseudopopulist heroine, a cop assigned to clean up the mess.

One thing Kieslowski and the Coens have in common—apart from heavy-handedness at their worst moments—is that they are regionalists and historians, though many qualifiers have to be added to this description. Kieslowski never learned French fluently, a language spoken in all four of the films he made after *The Decalogue*—a failing that earned him the scorn of some French critics; and like Antonioni, Godard, and Resnais in their zeitgeist modes, he remained a historian exclusively of the present. The Coens, who hail from Minneapolis, can be considered regionalists prior to *Fargo* only if one considers television a regional culture—and I think in some ways one can; in *Fargo* they take on their home turf as well as their TV culture, and the results are singular. In most of their pictures TV culture counts for much more than geographical setting and historical period. It's only in their pictures set in the present (*Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona*) and in the near present (*Fargo*) that they qualify as historians worthy of the name;[2] otherwise they're basically mixing and playing with media clichés, paying scant attention to real places or actual periods.

Broadly speaking, both *The Decalogue* and *Fargo* have a lot to do with television, but *Fargo* represents an apotheosis of a peculiar posthumanist TV tradition that the Coen brothers have made their own—to the same degree that *The Decalogue*, though it was made for television, represents an apotheosis of a humanist tradition in movies that may be on the verge of disappearing. I realize this sounds fairly overblown, but I suspect that how one values either work has something to do with how one values human life.

To clarify my biases about TV, I should stress that I'm thinking less of TV content—the impetus behind Clinton's much-debated V-chip proposal—than of

some basic properties of the medium. Studies disagree about whether watching violence on television makes children more violent, but there seems to be something closer to a consensus that watching television of any kind tends to make children's behavior more aggressive and antisocial. I would guess that this is partially true because remote-control buttons, channel dials, and on-off switches let us make other people appear and disappear, a power we can't enjoy in the world outside television; by extension we have a solipsistic habit of thinking that people don't fully exist if they're not on-screen.

Combine this habit with certain stylistic practices associated with commercials and sitcoms and you have the only kind of reality available to characters in a Coen brothers movie; whether these characters are lovable or detestable, they're lovable or detestable in a TV way—defined by a minimal set of traits that are endlessly reiterated and incapable of expansion or alteration, a fixed loop. By these standards Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), a cheerful, methodical pregnant police chief, and Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy)—a wormy car salesman from Minneapolis who's in debt and hires two thugs (Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare) to kidnap his wife (Kristin Rudrud) to get a ransom from her wealthy father (Harve Presnell)—have the predigested reality of TV personalities, but not the everyday reality of most of the characters in *The Decalogue*. (Kieslowski's work does include one striking exception: the "silent witness," a mysterious young man who briefly turns up in eight of the films—he can be seen warming his hands by a bonfire at the beginning of the first. This mythological figure points to the more pretentious side of Kieslowski, and I, for one, could have done without him.)

The lack of surprises in the story line of *Fargo* further suggests that style and attitude are just about everything for the Coens, and in some ways the plot details that are omitted—such as how Jerry ran up his debts in the first place and why Marge doesn't hear about a double murder in Minneapolis that's central to her investigation before she tracks down one of the killers—are more interesting than those that are included. By contrast, it's almost impossible to describe the plots of most films in *The Decalogue* without giving away twists, which is why I'm mainly keeping mum about them.

I don't mean to imply by any of this that the Coens are cynical and that Kieslowski isn't. One thing that probably makes Kieslowski more controversial in Europe than in the U.S., and the Coens more controversial in the U.S. than in Europe, is that their commercial calculations are more easily perceived at home than elsewhere, without the window dressing of subtitles. Above all *The Decalogue* is a packaging idea, successfully designed to give Kieslowski an international reputation and made in part for export—which is why, by his own admission, Polish politics, queues in front of shops, and ration cards were all pointedly

excluded and the all-purpose symbolic "silent witness" was slipped in as an afterthought.

Yet Kieslowski seemed anything but cynical when it came to television. As he put it in the book *Kieslowski on Kieslowski:* "I don't think the television viewer is less intelligent than the cinema audience. The reason why television is the way it is, isn't because the viewers are slow-witted but because editors think they are. . . . This doesn't apply so much to British television which isn't as stupid as German, French or Polish television. British television is a little more predisposed to education, on the one hand, and, on the other, to presenting opinions and matters connected with culture . . . and this is done through their precise, broad, and exact documentary films and films about individuals. Whereas television in most countries—including America—is as idiotic as it is because the editors think people are idiots."

That's what the Coen brothers seem to think too; if one considers all the laughs found in *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and *Fargo*, there are very few that aren't predicated on some version of the notion that people are idiots—the people on-screen, that is; those in the audience laughing at the idiots are hip aficionados, just like the Coens. In *Fargo* one way to gauge the degree of idiocy of the characters is by observing what they're watching on TV. After the kidnappers have sex with bimbo prostitutes on twin beds in a roadhouse, all four of them are seen watching the *Tonight Show* together, which merits a sizable guffaw; then we cut to Marge beside her sleeping husband in their bedroom watching a nature documentary about insects, which produces only a titter. (If Marge were watching the *Tonight Show* and the kidnappers and prostitutes were watching the nature documentary, the scale of the relative derision would doubtless be reversed.) Later on the sullen, silent kidnapper (Peter Stormare) is seen watching a daytime soap on a set with poor reception while he distractedly scarfs down junk food, a detail that is considered more worthy of our interest than the kidnapped woman who lies dead in a corner of the same room; precisely when and how she died is made to seem a trivial matter—a passing detail, lost (as it were) between commercial breaks. Granted, this emphasis may be a commentary on the callousness of the kidnappers; but isn't it also a commentary on the callousness of the Coens and their audience?

This may seem to mark the Coens as smart-alecky opportunists, but if one looks more closely at their filmmaking practice as opposed to their gags and putons, they're clearly interested in being artists, not simply in making a killing at the box office. The complex web of paranoid misapprehensions that form the noirish plot of *Blood Simple* should be perceived as an artistic statement about the period we're living in—as the opening narration comparing Texans to Russian commu-

nists suggests—and not merely as a set of heartless genre mechanisms, though it's also that.

As a further indication of this, let me cite what I regard as the key scene in *Fargo*—a disturbing interlude that strikes many others as wrong or dubious because it has nothing to do with the story proper. Late one night Marge gets a phone call from a guy she knew in high school, Mike Yanagita (Steve Park), who's now based in the Twin Cities; it's strongly hinted that they used to be a couple. (Marge is now married to a wildlife painter named Norm who works mainly at home.) Mike had seen Marge on TV in connection with her murder investigation, and the next day they wind up meeting in the bar of her hotel. Frantically trying to reestablish some intimacy with her by sitting next to her in their booth (she firmly but politely asks him to move back to the other side), Mike tells her he was married to an acquaintance of hers named Linda, who died of leukemia; he adds that he's been working as an engineer, then breaks down in convulsive sobs and speaks forlornly about his loneliness. The next morning, chatting on the phone to another old friend, Marge discovers Mike was never married to Linda (who's still very much alive), has "psychiatric problems," and lives with his parents—and this is the last we hear of him.

In terms of plot this episode is awkwardly extraneous, but in terms of theme—a lonely individual lying compulsively, trying without success to hide his desperation—it registers as central. Even the fact that Mike's ethnic background is Japanese while nearly everyone else, including Marge, is Swedish-American may be relevant; it seems that Swedish-Americans have nailed-down styles for articulating their emotional repression in social situations—grotesquely unfeeling in Jerry Lundegaard's case, especially when he's speaking to his wife or son, affable and easygoing in Marge's—and Mike doesn't. In any case, the sheer unresolved embarrassment of this scene has nothing to do with the movie "working" in commercial terms and everything to do with the Coens trying to give it some artistic coherence. Yet it's still only half a gesture, because they're seemingly unequipped to make Mike anything more than a sitcom character—a two-dimensional geek whose first words to Marge after greeting her are a reference to her hotel: "You know it's a Radisson, so you know it's pretty good."

Nobody could ever accuse Kieslowski of this kind of misanthropic, and, I would argue, TV-derived shorthand, no matter how sarcastic he gets. The most odious character I can think of in *The Decalogue* is a young, virtually motiveless killer (Miroslaw Baka) from the countryside who figures centrally in the fifth film ("Thou shalt not kill")—known as *A Short Film About Killing* in its expanded 85-minute version—but at no point does Kieslowski present him simply with disdain or a curt dismissal. Indeed, this character's eventual public execution is made to

seem just as horrific as his own gratuitous murder of a cabdriver; both events are shown in real time, implicating the viewer in each process. We never learn very much about him, and no effort is made to make his victim likable or charismatic, but they're both worthier human beings than anyone the Coens have filmed—even worthier than Marge, their seeming favorite—because they have a wider, more varied, and less predictable pool of human traits. No one in Kieslowski's world is ever bigger than life; in the Coens' world you virtually have to be to get their form of validation and recognition. (The Native American auto mechanic and ex-convict is emblematic of this knee-jerk hyperbole; when he explodes in a violent rage at one point he might as well be the mythical biker and bounty hunter in *Raising Arizona*, a mere assembly of pasteboard movie conventions.)

"Rich fellas come up an' they die," Ma Joad says at the end of John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, "an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out. But we keep a-comin'. We're the people that live. Can't nobody lick us. We'll go on forever, pa. We're the people." Perversely, I was reminded of this hokey speech during the last scene of *Fargo*, which features Marge and Norm (John Carroll Lynch) conversing in bed—the only characters toward whom the Coens can express any warmth. But if the Joads in 1940 stood for some sort of populist triumph over social injustice and adversity, the salt-of-the-earth Gundersons become expendable as soon as they serve their prescribed function—which is to validate our amused tolerance for good-hearted folks with funny accents and down-home truths surviving in an absurd universe. Yet the world they inhabit is devoid of other meaning, too grim to make their survival count for much more than first place in the Coens' hit parade of favorite hicks.

The regional flavor of Kieslowski's Warsaw in *The Decalogue* is only slightly less acrid, but its sourness is ultimately made to seem incidental rather than central to the ten tales being told. The fact that each film in the series lasts less than an hour might have something to do with this. (*A Short Film About Killing* makes room for more cruelty and violence, including a cat's body swinging from a rope and the killer crushing the cabdriver's dentures, but I'm not persuaded it has anything more to say about breaking the Fifth Commandment.)

One thing that's potentially exciting about movies that last about an hour is how much can be done within that format. Admittedly, a lot of Hollywood B-films of the 40s and 50s with comparable running times are strictly from hunger, but if one turns to masterpieces and near masterpieces, ranging from the Val Lewton horror classics, William Castle's *When Strangers Marry*, and Walt Disney's *Dumbo* and *The Three Caballeros* to Ousmane Sembene's *Black Girl*, Luis Buñuel's *Simon of the Desert*, and Christopher Munch's *The Hours and Times*—or even to just well-crafted jobs like most of the quickie thrillers done in the "Whistler" series in the 40s—it's surprising how rich and satisfying many of them are. (By comparison it's

amazing how padded most current features are. If many short features, such as those from the 30s, tend to speed up narrative events unnaturally, the average 100-minute or two-hour feature of today tends to slow them down just as mechanically.)

Charting moral ambiguities among characters who are never as fixed or as finite as we initially suppose, the ten films of *The Decalogue* are brave enough to yield questions that demand further thought rather than elicit our self-applause for recognizing our superiority to—or even our affection for—the characters on-screen. The finely sculpted scripts of these films become suggestions about how we might think about these people, not directives about how we should judge them. This contemplative style doesn't prevent any of these films from being entertaining; some of Kieslowski's jokes can be downright raucous, like the Polish punk-rock invitation to break all the commandments that launches the tenth film, and I can't say that any of the films in *The Decalogue* ever bored me. But they're usually entertaining in a quiet way, without the stylistic grandstanding the Coens seem to require to function at all. As dark and sardonic as *The Decalogue* and *Fargo* are in their alternating sweetness and sourness—above all in their comic and despairing depictions of the multiple, complex secrets people keep from one another and sometimes from themselves as they try to place their lives in order—only *The Decalogue* sends me out of the theater with some measure of hope.

—*Chicago Reader*, March 29, 1996

NOTES

1. *Heaven* was realized posthumously—and effectively—by Tom Tykwer, in 2002.
2. To *Fargo* one must now add *The Big Lebowski* (1998), set during the Gulf War, which I consider the Coens' most likable feature to date. [2002]

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Life Intimidates Art

Irma Vep

> The whole point is that the world is constantly changing, and that as an artist one must always invent new devices, new tools, to describe new feelings, new situations. . . . If we don't invent our own values, our own syntax, we will fail at describing our own world. —Olivier Assayas, in a letter to critic Kent Jones

Like many other eras, ours is not inordinately fond of examining itself, and any movie that does that work for us risks being overlooked, resented, or simply misunderstood. Hou Hsiao-hsien's Taiwanese *Goodbye, South, Goodbye,* one of the major films at Cannes last year to perform this task, was greeted mainly by bored puzzlement. But a Peruvian film critic in Chicago a few weeks back mentioned to me that this movie told him more about what was happening in contemporary Peru than any other he'd seen—which suggests that our awareness of global capitalism's recent activities may be more germane to appreciating certain movies than their particular nationalities.

National identity can often obscure what certain films are saying, however, especially on the film's home turf. Take Jim Jarmusch's American movie *Dead Man,* which premiered at Cannes in 1995 and did pretty well globally, both critically and commercially, before straggling into this country a year later, where it was widely written off. Or consider Olivier Assayas's French movie *Irma Vep,* another exciting state-of-the-planet address, which I saw at Cannes in 1996: it did terrible business in France the following fall but enjoyed an unexpectedly brisk box office at New York's Film Forum last month, where it's already been held over several weeks. Creepy and hip, fast moving and provocative, occasionally quite funny, and adept in its uses of pop music, *Irma Vep* has a good many calling cards, though disagreements are likely to start as soon as one has to consider what it's about.

This week the Film Center is showing *Irma Vep* no fewer than eleven times, so you'll have a chance to make up your own mind. You may decide that this dark, brittle, disturbing comedy about low-budget French filmmaking doesn't say anything about the capitalist world right now—and I don't mean to suggest that you won't be able to enjoy the movie on a more modest level. Indeed, if you know as

little about French cinema as David Denby, you might arrive at a conclusion comparable to his in his recent rave review in *New York* magazine (so positive it was reproduced in its entirety by the distributor): "The French have a great culture, a great history, but they are in a state of futility. A filmmaking industry that was both artistically innovative and financially resourceful now lies in ruins, destroyed by vanity, inconsequence, and the philistine exuberance of American entertainment, which both enrages the French and leaves them sick with envy: They can't make our movies, and increasingly they can't make their own. . . . *Irma Vep* may be a bitter lament over a dead art form, but the movie itself is an extraordinary sign of life."

I can't imagine what sort of French people Denby hangs out with, because this cosmic description of "the French" excludes virtually every French filmmaker, critic, and filmgoer I know—many of whom are even more delighted by "the philistine exuberance of American entertainment" than Denby is. (When I was in Paris last month, *Everyone Says I Love You* was playing everywhere.) But from Denby's comments I can easily infer what French movies he doesn't see: the industry he finds in ruins last year produced, along with many other commercial successes, *When the Cat's Away*, *Encore*, *Le garçu*, *Ninette and Boni*, *Thieves*, and *Three Lives and Only One Death*—to cite only the first few titles that come to mind. If you ignore French cinema as studiously as Denby does, however—and this isn't only a matter of not attending festivals like Cannes—any sort of self-validating generalization will make sense. Many of his most prestigious New York colleagues see only one or two movies a day at Cannes and then write back to their readers with the same breezy, confident expertise about the moribund state of world cinema, usually concluding that the parties were better than the movies. (And no wonder—the parties speak their kind of language; the movies don't.)

But if the Denbys, the Janet Maslins, and the Anthony Lanes are supposed to be our urbane guides to the state of world cinema, *Irma Vep* is at best only one example of the sort of films that elude their grasp. Despite Denby's pronouncements, this is a movie that could be taking place almost anywhere in the world. Most of the dialogue is in English, and though the film within the film happens to be a remake of a silent French classic—Louis Feuillade's glorious 1916 serial *Les vampires*—the behavior and attitudes in *Irma Vep* have more to do with 1996 filmmaking in general and what this says about the world than they do with French filmmaking at any time and what this says about "the French."

At the same time, French people are every bit as capable of misreading the film in relation to its nationality as New York "experts," as if it were exclusively about French people. But Denby has at least half a point when he says, "I don't see how any French person could see this movie without wincing: Assayas seems to be getting at widely shared character flaws—egotism and vanity as well as

intellectual pretension substituting for creativity." In other words, the nerve that Assayas hits is more likely to alienate French viewers, just as the nerve hit by *Dead Man* was more likely to alienate Americans. Still, I think what *Irma Vep* is saying about the world in general and filmmaking in particular concerns us all.

"Irma Vep," the title of the film within the film, is the head villainess in *Les vampires*, her name an anagram of "vampire," who rules a gang of thieves who prey exclusively on the rich. Played in the original serial by Musidora—a deft, dark-haired stage and music-hall performer who did all her own stunt work and whose plumpness, like that of Theda Bara, virtually defined female beauty in the teens—the character is identified mainly by the black tights and black mask she wears when slinking down corridors and fleetly escaping over rooftops. (Her costume—and much more in *Les vampires*—inspired the look of such later fantasy-adventures as *The Phantom* and *Batman*.)

Part of the exquisite magic of *Les vampires* today, apparent in the clips included in *Irma Vep*, is its comprehensive grasp of what Paris and Parisians looked like in the teens—an era that now appears closer to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth. Another part of its magic, cherished by the early surrealists, resides in the mysterious intrigues and hidden networks lurking behind its everyday settings, personified but not entirely exhausted by Irma and her band of co-conspirators. Though she's killed at the end of *Les vampires*, her gang survives in Nice in Feuillade's sublime 1918 sequel *Tih Minh*, where it conspires to avenge her death and take over the entire world.

Though the sexiness of both serials is tied to the group's secret machinations, Musidora's plucky Vep gives them a particular spin: not only has she remained a fetish object for several generations of intellectuals and cinephiles, but French feminists called their first film event the Musidora Film Festival. The serials' appeal also has to do with their improvisation on a day-to-day basis, virtually while they were being shot, creating dreamlike undercurrents. Clearly a similar effect is at work in *Irma Vep:* scripted in ten days and shot in less than a month, the film unravels like a delirious piece of automatic writing, though in this case the sinister implications apply to a very different world—our own.

What does it mean, in fact, to try to remake *Les vampires* eighty years later? For every character in *Irma Vep*, both male and female—virtually all of them part of the workaholic atmosphere of a film shoot, and thereby part of the same capitalist treadmill affecting most of us—it has something to do with libido and the sexual fantasies unleashed by that aggressive energy.

The fantasies are set in motion by the actress taking the Musidora part: Maggie Cheung, the real-life star of Hong Kong cinema, playing herself. The lure of

third-world exoticism may seem relatively extraneous to *Les vampires*, but it functions centrally in *Tih Minh*, where the title heroine is Vietnamese. Though Cheung is as slender as Musidora was voluptuous (in keeping with 90s fashion) and speaks not a word of French, she's cast by middle-aged French director René Vidal (Jean-Pierre Léaud) after he sees one of her action pictures in Marrakech. Arriving in Paris from Hong Kong at the beginning of *Irma Vep*, she's taken directly to Vidal, who shows her the clip from *The Heroic Trio* (1993) that won him over, expressing admiration for the grace of her stunt work; when she points out that her stunt work was done by a double, the admission makes no dent in his enthusiasm.

Cheung's main escort in Paris is Zoë (Nathalie Richard), who's handling the costumes on Vidal's picture. She promptly gets Cheung fitted in a tight latex suit from a sex shop. As smitten with Cheung as Vidal is, Zoë wryly notes that the still Vidal offers as a guide to how the actress should look—Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman—makes her resemble a hooker, but this doesn't stop Zoë from fixating on Maggie in the latex suit herself. At a dinner party later, she confides her lustful feelings to the hostess (Bulle Ogier); the hostess, armed with this confession, mortifies Zoë by asking Maggie if she likes girls, then telling her about Zoë's secret desires.

This daisy chain of solipsistic desire and leering innuendo—in which no one listens to anyone else, or listens only in order to advance his or her position or to betray someone later—courses through the remainder of the movie like an electrical current, accumulating more bad vibes en route and tarnishing everyone but Cheung. Assayas records this feverish process in compulsive, twitchy camera movements as restless and neurotic as the characters, refusing to distance himself stylistically from this behavior, allowing it to turn his attention and ours as relentlessly as a series of tidal waves. In this context, where no one is fully in control but everyone is driven, evil in an everyday environment is no longer represented by Irma Vep and her gang but by the film crew's thwarted energies and desires and their effects, creeping inexorably into one social situation after another.

Pervading the shoot is the poisonous atmosphere of alienated labor. Vidal himself, temperamental and nervous as only Léaud can make him, is regarded by the crew as a director who used to make good films and is now a basket case, a crumpled patriarch; Zoë—the character we tend to identify with the most—trades loads of ugly backbiting with the production supervisor (Dominique Faysse); and one of the actors bitterly complains about everyone else, recalling the professionalism of a Japanese crew he once worked with. Assayas is swimming in an atheistic world where neither art nor business can function as presiding deity, so sexual desire and aggrieved irritation take over by default. Vidal's sexual fixation on Cheung is apparently the only justification for the film, and even that's elimi-

nated when another director of Vidal's generation (Lou Castel)—a friend of his, in fact—takes over and decides to replace Cheung with a French actress, arguing on the basis of his own psychosexuality that Musidora was working-class French, like Arletty.

Just as a Taiwanese film may have more to say about Peru than any other film, the criticism I found most relevant to *Irma Vep* after seeing it a year ago was French writer Nicole Brenez's description of Fassbinder's *Beware of the Holy Whore*, which she was comparing to Godard's *Contempt* and Wim Wenders's *The State of Things*: "Its subject isn't the cinema but the body, its material isn't the image but the actor, its problem isn't representation but power." But because these three films about filmmaking no longer figure in the vocabularies of most New York film critics—who seem to think that François Truffaut's *Day for Night* is the first and last word on the subject—it's the patriarchal Truffaut film that's invariably invoked to explain what Assayas's movie is like. True, Truffaut's film and *Irma Vep* are both comedies about a film in production, but that's pretty much where the similarity ends. To call *Irma Vep* a *Day for Night* of the 90s is to do it a gross injustice: for all the charm and bounce of Truffaut's movie, it has next to nothing to say about the contemporary world.

I feel more comfortable using Godard, Wenders, and Fassbinder as points of comparison to *Irma Vep*—not only because the film in some ways suggests a multinational, bilingual companion piece to their works but also because, to paraphrase Brenez on Fassbinder, its true subject is not the cinema but the body of its star, its material is not the image but Cheung herself, and its "problem" is not representation but the power struggles that swirl around her. Because of the film's peculiar focus, some plot details remain obstinately mysterious, such as Cheung's supposed interest in buying her own latex suit (alleged by Zoë but unconfirmed by Cheung herself) and the precise nature of Vidal's breakdown—which may not be a breakdown at all. What mainly interests Assayas is the way news and rumors circulate, not the precise truth of the allegations people make about one another. This is why the world of *Irma Vep* is essentially atheistic; the truth is unknowable, and process is everything.

A Chinese star who grew up in England (which accounts for her excellent English) and who's appeared in almost seventy films since 1984, including most of the features of Wong Kar-wai, Cheung is exceptionally gifted when she's doing comedy (as in the 1989 *The Iceman Cometh*) and pantomime (as in her great performance as the silent Shanghai film actress Ruan Lingyu in Stanley Kwan's 1991 masterpiece, *Actress*). She gets a few chances at both comedy and pantomime here, but since she's playing a version of herself, this isn't an ideal

showcase for her acting, though it does rely on her poise and star power. Indeed, Assayas is plainly so smitten with her himself that she can function here only as an idealized figure. At most she legitimizes the desire of others (as in her moving dialogue with Vidal), but as a rule she seems to exist independently of the forces that plague everyone else—the only real pro in sight, uncontaminated by the projections of others. In this respect she recalls the fantasy goddess figures of Jacques Rivette's *Duelle* and *Noroît;* it's also probable that Rivette's nervous collapse in the mid-70s—shortly after making these films and starting a third in the same series—was the inspiration for Vidal's departure from "Irma Vep." (When Rivette abandoned his feature, it was rumored that Godard himself offered to take it over.)

In an interesting paradox, though *Irma Vep* invites and suggests many cinematic cross-references, its subject isn't "cinema" but cinema as a battleground, a treacherous terrain where power struggles are constantly waged. A few of these struggles, like those in *Contempt* and *The State of Things,* are between business and art—most notably and hilariously here in Cheung's interview with an aggressive French TV journalist (Antoine Basler) eager to superimpose the commercial values of a John Woo or a Jackie Chan over the values of the art cinema Vidal represents, and oblivious to Cheung's sensible demurrals. (Much like Denby, this journalist declares that the French cinema of authors is finished—another example of solipsistic self-validation like so many others in the film. Yet Assayas is not simply swatting an easy target: a former *Cahiers du cinéma* critic with a particular interest in Asian cinema, he likes Woo himself.)

But most of the film's struggles, like those in the Fassbinder film, are parodies of those between artmaking and business, carried out on their fringes. They're struggles, in other words, about the way most of us live—unable to control the traffic of art or business, stranded on the margins of both, and doing whatever we can, usually to one another.

When it comes to the film Vidal is making—"Irma Vep" as opposed to Assayas's *Irma Vep*—what we discover is far more mysterious than anything else in the film. We see only three samples: first, a batch of disconnected rushes that Vidal inexplicably recoils from as worthless (ultimately leading to his departure from the project) and later two extended edited sequences that remain profoundly inconclusive. In effect Assayas offers in these two sequences two radically different versions of this hypothetical film that together form a potent dialectic—the first (apparently) propelled by Cheung, the second (apparently) propelled by Vidal. The fact that neither sequence comfortably or plausibly "fits" with the remainder of *Irma Vep* is central to their beauty and mystery. Like the precredits sequence in

John Cassavetes's *Faces*, when John Marley joins several business associates at a private screening of a film we never see, these sequences rupture the film's narrative and style and are never accounted for, as if the filmmaker were passing without warning between parallel universes. (Moreover, both sequences appear to exist outside any clear historical time frame—unlike the glimpses at the dinner party of a May '68 agitational film shown on video.)

In the first of these sequences—which is in color and may or may not be a dream—Cheung in her squeaky latex suit is seen emerging late at night from her hotel room after much pacing about. Following a maid, she sneaks into another room where a nude American woman (Arsinée Khanjian, an actress best known as Atom Egoyan's wife and frequent star) is speaking fretfully long-distance to her husband or lover about her boredom and isolation. (Khanjian, an estranged foreigner in Paris speaking English, functions as Cheung's doppelgänger, fully naked just as Cheung is always fully clothed in the film—though, like Musidora, she's plumper than Cheung.) Stealing the woman's jewels, Cheung runs outside to the roof in the rain, examines the jewels, climbs higher, then tosses the jewels over a ledge. In the second of these sequences—the last in the film—we see a version of the dailies Vidal edited the night before, about the same time he decided to abandon the film: Cheung again appears in her latex suit, but this time there's no coherent narrative (and no color) but a great deal of graphic scratching on the images that highlights or embellishes certain details, accompanied by industrial music. (The biggest probable source of inspiration here is Jean-Isadore Isou's great 1952 experimental feature *Venom and Eternity*.)

These two very different samples represent two possible ways of "remaking" *Les vampires* in the 1990s—the first a strictly commercial approach, the second strictly experimental. Neither one corresponds to Vidal's approach, which apparently exists somewhere between them. Both samples seem to belong not to the narrative of Assayas's film but to its unconscious: they're the solipsistic dreams of that narrative. What we know of Cheung and Vidal doesn't adequately account for either sequence psychologically, though both sequences offer us plenty of tantalizing clues. Like Cheung herself, in all her beauty and glory, these two provocative, contradictory glimpses of a never-to-be-made film hover over the action like terminal boundaries—like subtle reproaches, showing what we might be missing.

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Stanley Kwan's *Actress*

Writing History in Quicksand

The following was written for Stanley Kwan. La via orientale al melodramma, *an Italian catalogue for a Kwan retrospective held at the Thirty-Sixth Pesaro International Festival of New Cinema in July 2000. (The event was organized by Giovanni Spagnoletti, with the collaboration of Alessandro Borri and Olaf Möller, and the book was published by Editrice Il Castoro.) Unfortunately, the festival was subsequently unable to secure a complete print of* Actress *for the event, and it appears that the only surviving print of the full version—assuming that any at all survives—is the one shown several years ago on Australia's multicultural TV channel, SBS. (Ironically, at the same festival, I was able to see my first Ruan Lingyu feature, on video.)*

There's a certain branch of contemporary American etiquette that argues that if certain films (or versions of films) are unavailable, it is preferable not to speak (or hear, or read) about them—a position that also led the editor of my recent book Movie Wars *to make extensive cuts in the articles written for the French magazine* Trafic *that compose the ninth chapter, "Trafficking in Movies (Festival-Hopping in the Nineties)"—specifically in order to reduce the number of films discussed that he (and, by extension, many other readers) had never heard of. The fact that a good many of my French readers hadn't heard of or seen many of the same films, though it never would have occurred to the editors of* Trafic *to make cuts for the same reason, suggests an interesting cultural distinction—that the model of consumption currently ruling American criticism is so monolithic that many arrive at the conclusion that readers are better kept in ignorance about work they can't see (or, in some cases, can't see right away). Consequently, my decision to publish an article about a film that remains out of reach may be regarded as elitist or, at the very least, as an example of bad manners.*[1] *My assumptions are that grown-ups can handle information that doesn't automatically lead to instant gratification—and that the only possible way to get access to certain films is to write about them.*

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

—L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

It seems emblematic of the fugitive identity of Stanley Kwan's masterpiece that hardly anyone agrees on its English title. I've encountered at least five candidates, including alternative spellings—*Actress*, *The Actress*, *Centre Stage*, *Center Stage*, and *The New China Woman*—and accounts of its correct running time tend to be

almost as various. Luckily, the best and longest version, running 146 minutes, with what I regard as the best title, *Actress*, was the first one I ever saw, during my first visit to Asia—at the Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan in 1991—but to find a print of that version today, one reportedly has to go to Australia. According to film critic Bérénice Reynaud, who learned this from Kwan himself, the film's original negative was destroyed by Golden Harvest a few years ago, apparently in a fit of the sort of historical absent-mindedness that characterizes Hong Kong cinema in general. Prophetically, "original print lost" appears on the screen at least five times in *Actress*—each time in reference to a separate silent feature with Ruan Lingyu that is being recreated or, less often, excerpted. Each time this title appears, it registers as a reproach, a lament, a lash of pain for the senseless loss; and less than a decade later, *Actress* itself suffers the same fate.

I've just implied that historical absent-mindedness characterizes Hong Kong cinema in particular. I should have said that it characterizes the cinema as a whole, across the globe, with particular emphasis on the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It might even be said to be a central part of the ideology of capitalism to cultivate amnesia where cinema is concerned, though the ideology of communism in this regard hasn't been any better. To keep product moving you have to either make it new or pretend that it's new, and the moment that you don't think you can go on doing this, you have to destroy whatever you decide happens to be old—simply in order to accord more space to whatever you happen to decide is new, whether it actually is or not. Call it an economic form of lobotomy or electroshock—and one that intervenes everywhere, as inexorably and as predictably as other kinds of ecological violence can be found today in both Peru and Taiwan, in North America and Europe and the Middle East.

Yet consider also why everything that matters most in Chinese cinema over the past decade—starting with my own list of *City of Sadness*, *The Puppetmaster*, *Good Men, Good Women*, *Days of Being Wild*, *A Brighter Summer Day*, *The Blue Kite*, *Blush*, and *Platform*—is an explicit intervention about (and declaration of) history and therefore a concerted act of defiance in relation to this climate. Indeed, consider how even some of the contemporary works that came on the heels of these period movies were in fact explicitly conceived as histories of the present—including *Mahjong*, *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, *The River*, *Happy Together*, *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*, and *Mr. Zhao*. Indeed, if the term "Hong Kong New Wave" means anything more than an automatic sales pitch, it helps to remember that the French New Wave was largely predicated on a particular kind of critical intelligence tied to film history—a critical sorting out of what needed to be kept and what needed to be discarded, polemically offered in response to the box-office verdicts about these same matters and presided over by gurus like Henri Langlois and André Bazin. From this standpoint, it might be argued that

Actress remains the key film of the Hong Kong New Wave precisely because it is the only one on which an important film critic and film historian, Peggy Chiao, played a substantial role.

It is also the Hong Kong New Wave film that most evokes a particular brand of glamour and cinephilia that I would connect specifically to George Cukor and MGM in the 50s—and not only because Cukor directed a black-and-white film for MGM in 1953 called *The Actress:* in fact, two of his subsequent films for MGM in the 50s that are both in color, *Bhowani Junction* and *Les Girls*, probably come closer to the mark. The relation of director to actress in both cases is quite simply and unambiguously one of worship—an attitude of reverence, wonder, and awe in relation to feminine beauty—and in this respect another relevant aesthetic cross-reference might be Terence Davies' equally religious evocations of 50s Hollywood in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes.*

> The Chinese don't accord much importance to things of the past, whether it's films, heritage, or even clothes or furniture. In Asia nothing is preserved, turning towards the past is regarded as stupid, aberrant.
>
> —Maggie Cheung in *Les inrockuptibles* (December 1, 1999), in reference to *Actress*

An embarrassed confession is in order: the only performances of Ruan Lingyu I was able to see before writing this essay are those excerpted by Kwan in the biopic that bears her name—a unique blend of documentary and fiction, investigation and speculation, entailing interviews with surviving witnesses, conversations with contemporary actors in the film, a playwright who wrote a miniseries about Ruan for mainland Chinese TV, and Kwan himself, and even a certain amount of creative collaboration on the part of the viewer. Indeed, this is do-it-yourself history and film history for everyone involved, on both sides of the camera, and to embark on such a journey at all it has to be acknowledged at the outset that the objects of scrutiny are already on the verge of extinction. According to Reynaud, only five of Ruan Lingyu's features have survived: *Love and Duty* (Bu Wancang, 1931), *The Peach Girl* (Bu Wancang, 1931), *Little Toys* (Sun Yu, 1933), *The Goddess* (Wu Yonggang, 1934), and *New Women* (Cai Chusheng, 1934). Moreover, if we consider the scene in *Actress* that shows *New Women* being shorn of footage about "freeloading journalists" at nightclubs to appease the Shanghai Press Union, the odds that we have even this feature in complete form seem fairly remote. And it's worth adding that *Love and Duty* was discovered in 1994, reportedly in Uruguay, years after *Actress* was completed. By contrast, apparently all the films Ruan made at the start of her career for the Mingxing studio in the 1920s were destroyed by the Japanese occupation, and if one adds to this list all the other key features identi-

fied as lost in Kwan's feature—*Spring Dream in the Old Capital* (Sun Yu, 1930), *Wild Grass* (Sun Yu, 1930), *Three Modern Women* (1932), *Night in the City* (Fei Mu, 1933), and *The Sea of Fragrant Snow* (Fei Mu, 1934)—one still hasn't exhausted the parade of missing titles (for example, Fei Mu's *A Life*, in 1934).

Faced with this sort of devastation, Kwan's project amounts to a foolhardy, utopian effort—what might be called writing history in quicksand. Clearly this undertaking didn't satisfy Charles Tesson in the December 1999 issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*, whose one-paragraph review came close to dismissing the film for its lack of historical rigor and for Maggie Cheung's failure to live up to Ruan Lingyu's example in performing a scene from *New Women*.

It's worth conceding that Cheung—who went on to win the best actress prize at Berlin for her performance as Ruan Lingyu (deservedly, in my opinion), making her the first Chinese film actress ever to win an international prize—was a last-minute replacement for Sylvia Chang in the part, which would have been much more conventional casting (and arguably would have led to a less interesting film). Yet the lack of a precise fit between a tragedienne of the 30s and a comedienne of the 80s, despite a compulsion to juxtapose them, is clearly part of Kwan's radical strategy, and the acute and moving historical pathos of *Actress* would surely be diminished without this lack. One might even inquire what point there is in asking for a duplication or approximation anyway, as Tesson implicitly does, when we already have samples of the original Ruan Lingyu on film. Far more illuminating is Reynaud's reading of Kwan's intentions in her invaluable *Nouvelle Chines, Nouveaux cinémas:*

> Like every Chinese cinephile, Stanley Kwan is in love with Ruan Lingyu; consequently, he didn't ask Maggie Cheung to substitute her own image for that for the dead star, but to achieve something much more difficult: to use her body as a gateway between the present (Hong Kong) and the past (the golden age of the Shanghai studios). For this, he needed a young woman who embodied, in her own time, a modernity comparable to the one Ruan tried (but failed) to represent in the 30s. For Hong Kong's "modernity" springs from a succession of tragedies: colonization, separation from the motherland, emigration, exile, uprooting. And, born in Hong Kong but raised in England, Cheung long felt like a foreigner in both countries.

Here's most of what I've been able to discover about Ruan Lingyu prior to the point at which *Actress* begins: Born Ruan Fenggeng in Shanghai on April 26, 1910, of Cantonese ancestry, her life was full of tragedy almost from the outset. Her father, a machinist, died when she was six, leaving the family in desperate straits and forcing her young mother to work as a domestic. In 1918 she entered

the Chongde Girls' School. At sixteen, with her name already changed to Ruan Lingyu, she met Zhang Damin, the sixth scion of Shanghai's wealthy Zhang family, on Haining Road, whom her mother briefly worked for. Months later she left school and moved into Zhang's apartment. In 1926 she auditioned for Mingxing director Bu Wancang (known in Kwan's film under his Western name, Richard Poh) at the urging of her brother-in-law, Zhang Huichong. She appeared in five films at Mingxing, then followed Bu to the newly formed Lianhua studio—the founding of which forms the basis of the opening scene of *Actress*, set in a dreamy sauna.[2]

Whether the movie happens to be *Song of the South*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Schindler's List*, or *Titanic*, the Disney-Spielberg-Cameron route into history that dominates Hollywood blockbuster cinema is to start with the clichéd archetypes that a place and time already evoke and then never stray too far from these boilerplate specifics for fear of challenging the audience. If you show viewers what they think they already know, and flatter them for already knowing it, the coast is clear for shuttling them briskly through the plot specifics like the key points in a theme-park ride. The fact that this process always entails the kind of mental shrinkage that comes from simplification, whatever the size of the sets, is literalized in the construction principles behind Disneyland and Disney World's Main Street, USA, where every brick, shingle, and gas lamp is literally five-eighths normal size. (As Disney himself once put it, this makes "the street a toy. . . . Besides, people like to think their world is somehow more grown up than Papa's was.") The same philosophy gets propounded in cartoon terms when aerial locations get conflated with maps in the opening shot of Florida in *Dumbo* or in the various evocations of South American locations in *Saludos Amigos*, and it incidentally explains James Cameron's idiotic but logical notion of having Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* sink with the Titanic: to demonstrate the heroine's art savvy in 1912 without making the audience feel any less sophisticated, you've got to shove that familiar totem into her stateroom.

Moreover, if shuttling the audience through thrilling, chilling plot specifics is your ultimate goal, then violence and/or death, the prime emblems of closure, are more likely than not the little gifts that you wind up dispensing near the end of line—which is why Bobby Driscoll gets gored by a bull at the climax of *Song of the South*, Spielberg brings us the A-bomb and the gas ovens (not to mention the Normandy landing in *Saving Private Ryan*), and Cameron achieves his own artistic apotheosis with hundreds of floating corpses. Better yet, if continuous speed is your ultimate goal, as it often is in Hong Kong's action cinema, dispensing death at regular intervals, in carefully choreographed spurts of mayhem, is

usually all it takes to keep the audience too occupied to worry about the niceties of set decoration.

By contrast, it's central to the commercial failure of the vastly underrated *The Newton Boys* that its director and cowriter, Richard Linklater, by deciding to tell a bank-robber story in which no one gets killed and most of the violence is light enough to pass for slapstick, clearly isn't interested in pursuing this sort of game plan at all. Even if the jolly period music by Jelly Roll Morton makes you periodically anticipate the retributory bloodbaths of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the movie keeps depositing you instead in privileged pockets of historical space, setting you loose in a recreated world and asking you to find your own way in it. In this respect, the nearest cousin to the spatial adventure of *The Newton Boys* is *Actress*.[3]

Specifically, *Actress* proposes the past as something larger and more labyrinthine than the stereotypical present, and thus even more worthy of our exploration and wonder. This isn't simply a matter of physical size but a question of psychological and narrative space—the degree to which the spectator's eye is free to roam, ponder, study, and dream about a specific set or location without the story imposing a particular narrow itinerary. The film may end with a death of its own—the mysterious suicide of its title heroine, which no one has ever been able to fully explain, despite a surplus of motivations. But it's central to the radicalism of Kwan's approach that, rather like the strategy of Nagisa Oshima in *Death by Hanging*, he refuses to let his protagonist remain dead—repeatedly collapsing her corpse back into the live body of Maggie Cheung for a stretch toward the end of the film that is clearly designed to feel like an eternity. For Kwan, the past remains uncharted in relation to time as well as space, and it's one measure of his achievement to convey a sense of immensity in both realms.

Oscillating between live comedienne and dead tragedienne is one of the many zones of confusion that the film purposefully creates around the figure of Ruan Lingyu, soliciting creative contributions from the viewer's imagination in establishing the complex space—physical, metaphysical, spiritual, historical, ideological, political, mythical, sexual, emotional, intellectual, conceptual—she occupies in the film. It would be helpful to list some of the other productive befuddlements:

1. The dialectical play between Ruan and Cheung throughout the film refuses to let us remain with either actress for long without forcibly reminding us of the other. The film virtually begins with this shotgun marriage: over stills of Ruan, Kwan speaks about her, then cuts immediately to Cheung responding to his comments. In the sequence eliciting Tesson's disapproval, Cheung as Ruan

runs through several takes of the latter's hospital-bed scene in *New Women*; then the camera pulls back from the scene in black and white and we hear someone say, "You forgot to lift the sheet to look at Maggie." Only then do we see the archive clip, and the differences between copy and original are certainly pronounced—though no more so than the differences between the actors playing Damin and Tang and the photographs of Damin and Tang. (Kwan presents the latter to us fairly late in the film, as if to rub our noses in the discrepancies.)

2. Like Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf, two other working-class heroines with seedy backgrounds, Ruan was a figure who seemed to thrive on confusions between her public image and private life—confusions that may have led to her suicide (one of the notes she left behind included the famous line, "renyan kewei": "the words of people are fearful")—and Kwan exploits this confusion in numerous ways. The first narrative scene in the film shows Cheung as Ruan shooting a scene from *Spring Dream in the Old Capital* on a glassed-in soundstage; the second shows her on a set of *Wild Grass*, even more stylized in appearance (with its blue walls, dark shadows, and snowfall visible through a window), so we may not perceive right away that she isn't shooting another scene but speaking to Li Lili (Carina Lau) about her own life.

3. Because the known facts of Ruan's life are somewhat spotty and fragmented, the narrative segments tend to be highly episodic, creating diverse gaps and ellipses that we're invited to fill with our imaginations. Kwan's fascination with his heroine's glamor as a fashion plate only intensifies the character's elusiveness in this respect, creating another gap between her image as a wealthy goddess and her role as a left-wing martyr deriving from her working-class origins, her late development as an actress who played progressive parts, and her suicide. (One should also consider the tension between her glamor and her status as a feminist role model in terms of her self-determination, her financial support of her former wealthy lover, and the fact that she killed herself on a holiday called Women's Day when she was scheduled to deliver a speech.) Moreover, as Ackbar Abbas points out in *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, *Actress* inverts the usual roles played by documentary and narrative insofar as "it is the fictional or narrative part of the work that recounts the known facts of Ruan Lingyu's life, while it is the documentary part that provides the elements of speculation and exploration."

4. Keeping all the documentary segments in black and white and most of the narrative segments in color enhances this strategy, but Kwan complicates it further by introducing black and white into the narrative segments in numerous ways—most strikingly, through the use of enormous black-and-white murals displaying urban backdrops on the Shanghai studio backlot. These backdrops—

which range from relatively realistic to extremely fanciful—create a great deal of spatial ambiguity whenever they occur. Further ambiguities crop up from time to time through scene transitions. Shortly after Ruan enters her new home, for instance, there's a match cut to her in a studio office wearing the same dress; she meets with Cai on the terrace, a two-dimensional black-and-white bridge and skyscraper visible behind them, and the sudden shift of scene may create the momentary impression that she's still at home. (The same sequence features one of her most touching references to her class origins—a discussion about the Chinese practice of squatting.)

5. Finally, lest we assume that spatial ambiguities are at play only in the narrative segments, one early black-and-white documentary segment shows us Kwan and Cheung conversing with each other while both are apparently facing the camera, with Kwan standing behind Cheung; it's only after we figure out that Kwan's face is reflected in a mirror that we grasp the deception.

Thanks to ambiguities of this kind, the task of historical retrieval becomes a trip through an expanding maze where our variable sense of offscreen space becomes central to our reading of the images. I don't mean to suggest by this, however, that Kwan's ambiguities are exclusively visual. Stephen Teo's review of the film in *Cinemaya*, no. 14 (Winter 1991–92), for instance, proposes a complex reading of the film in relation to the characters' Chinese dialects (Ruan's Cantonese, Li correcting her mispronunciation of Mandarin, and so on), and the contrasting significations relating to Shanghai and Hong Kong are probably just as important. Nor do I wish to suggest that mystification is all that interests Kwan; when he shows us the kind of manual labor involved in pulling a camera dolly or creating a studio rainstorm, he's actually doing something closer to the reverse. When George Cukor shows us Ava Gardner looking into a mirror, perhaps a similar kind of meditation on self-regarding beauty and its imponderables is at play—though it might be equally profitable to think about Ruan in relation to Marlene Dietrich (mentioned several times) and/or Greta Garbo, both of whom came to prominence by aestheticizing certain sexually liberated working-class women's roles. Or maybe Kwan's agenda is simply an impulse that says that the best route into the past is an attempt to recreate it in your own terms—even when this simply means faithfully following your enchantment and bemusement, and asking more questions than you can ever hope to answer, hopefully getting lost in the process.

—*Cinema Scope*, no. 7 (Spring 2001)

NOTES

1. As this book goes to press, the shorter version of *Actress* is still available on DVD. [2002]

2. Most of this information comes from Michael G. Chang's "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s–1930s," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, edited by Yingjin Zhang (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), and most of the remainder comes from notes generously provided to me by Bérénice Reynaud.

3. There isn't a dull moment in *The Newton Boys*—its true story is packed with charm and interest—but the user-friendly storytelling that Cameron, Disney, and Spielberg bank on isn't as important as the film's other virtues: direction of actors, period detail, sense of rhythm, sweet-tempered tone, working-class solidarity, comic flavor, visual taste, and imagination. Both times I saw the picture I periodically had trouble telling three of the four Newton boys apart. The exception is Willis, the brother played by Matthew McConaughey—in what is surely his best and most likable performance—because it's always clear that he's the hero and the one in charge. But it's surely no fault of the actors that brothers Joe (Skeet Ulrich), Jess (Ethan Hawke), and Dock (Vincent D'Onofrio) lack the instant legibility of even Disney's seven dwarves. The problem is that Linklater has so much to say and do in scenes involving two or more of them that their identities tend to slide in and out of focus.

I can't tell you which two gang members are watching Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* from the balcony of a picture palace after a semibotched daytime heist in Toronto in 1924—my favorite movie reference in any Linklater feature. I'm much too preoccupied with the *Greed* scene itself, with Trina (ZaSu Pitts) refusing to let Mac (Gibson Gowland) in from the cold when he knocks at her window, with the weird and fabulous way the huge movie screen is slanted in relation to the balcony and the plush theater accoutrements, and with the comment of one of the two gang members: "Hey, I know that gal—I went to Sunday school with her in Parsons." Pitts was born in Parsons, Kansas, in 1898, so I suppose one can deduce that the person uttering this line isn't a Texan at all, hence not a Newton but the nitroglycerin expert, Brentwood Glasscock (Dwight Yoakam).

But figuring out who the two characters are has so little to do with this wonderful little stretch of film that it matters as little as the fact that *Greed* was actually released several months after the scene is supposed to take place. Cameron or Spielberg wouldn't be caught dead creating a mysterious parenthesis of this kind, a discreet pocket of bliss in which audience members are invited to lose themselves: the necessity of lurching the story and the audience forward eliminates the very possibility of such a poetic and dreamlike interlude. (Adapted from "Open Spaces," *Chicago Reader*, April 3, 1998.)

Critical Distance

Godard's *Contempt*

Almost exactly thirty-three years ago, in October 1964, the critical reception of Jean-Luc Godard's widest American release of his career and his most expensive picture to date was overwhelmingly negative. But now that *Contempt* is being rereleased as an art film—in a brand-new print that's three minutes longer—the critical responses have been almost as overwhelmingly positive. It's tempting to say in explanation that we're more sophisticated in 1997 than we were in 1964—that we've absorbed or at least caught up with some of Godard's innovations—but I don't think this adequately or even correctly accounts for the difference in critical response. Despite all the current reviews that treat *Le mépris* as if it were some form of serene classical art, it's every bit as transgressive now as it was when it first appeared, and maybe more so. But because it's being packaged as an art movie rather than a mainstream release—and because Godard is a venerable master of sixty-six rather than an unruly upstart of thirty-three—we have different expectations.

I can remember how puzzled I was by this gorgeous film as an undergraduate. Though it was Godard's sixth feature, it was only the third to be released in the United States, preceded by *Breathless* in 1961 and by *Vivre sa vie* in 1963. The first of these was a cheap American-style thriller in black and white, the second a cheap French-style art film in black and white; *Contempt*, in glorious Technicolor and 'Scope, clearly didn't belong to either category. A big international coproduction (starring Brigitte Bardot and Jack Palance) that even played in my hometown in Alabama, it virtually began with a scene in which Bardot was stretched out nude on a bed beside a fully clothed, then-unknown Michel Piccoli while they engaged in a curious romantic dialogue about how much he loved her various body parts; a seemingly unmotivated use of red and blue filters punctuated the full-color shots. Coproduced by the vulgar American showman Joseph E. Levine—best known at the time for his distribution of Italian-made Hercules movies with Steve Reeves and his subsequent involvement with Federico Fellini—*Contempt* could only seem the grotesque marriage of crass exploitation and high art. (In fact, all the nude shots of Bardot were ordered by Levine after Godard considered the film done; acceding to the producer's request as

literally as possible, he even clarified the commodification process in the opening evaluation of Bardot's body.)

Stanley Kauffmann's review in the *New Republic* was characteristic of the scorn heaped on the film. It began: "Those interested in Brigitte Bardot's behind—in CinemaScope and color—will find ample rewards in *Contempt*." He went on to argue that the film's longest single sequence, transpiring between Piccoli's and Bardot's characters in their flat in Rome, "can serve in all film schools as an archetype of arrant egotism and bankrupt imagination in a director. . . . Underneath the arty prattle [of what Kauffmann termed Godard's "clique"] about his supposed style, one can hear their unconscious gasps: 'That film must cost so-and-so many thousands of dollars a minute! Any commercial hack would be concerned to make each minute count for something. But Jean-Luc doesn't care!' The hidden referent here is not aesthetic but budgetary bravado."

A short while after the film's release I invited Susan Sontag, who was at the time a literary and theater critic with some interest in film, to give a talk at my college. She had recently published an article about camp in *Partisan Review* that had created a flurry in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, and an article about *Vivre sa vie* had appeared in an ambitious new film magazine called *Moviegoer*. The night she came she read a still-unpublished essay called "On Style" that would be appearing in her forthcoming collection, *Against Interpretation*. After her talk, in a bar down the road from campus, I was shocked to hear her say that she'd been to see *Contempt* four or five times already. It was the first time I'd heard someone refer to the film as anything but a mess and an embarrassment, and I decided that maybe it deserved another look.

Even so, it was years before *Contempt* started to make much sense to me. And though today I wouldn't hesitate to call it a masterpiece and certainly one of the great films of the 60s—if not "the greatest work of art produced in postwar Europe," as critic Colin MacCabe labeled it in *Sight and Sound* last year—I still feel more comfortable with my earlier ambivalence about it than I do with its current acclamation as a timeless, unproblematic classic. Indeed, I would argue that Godard's eclecticism must be acknowledged and understood before one can genuinely appreciate the film.

Based on a novel by Alberto Moravia that I haven't read, *Il disprezzo* (published in English as *The Ghost at Noon*), *Contempt* focuses on the relationship between playwright Paul Javel (Piccoli) and his wife, Camille (Bardot), a former typist. While in Rome, Paul gets hired by American producer Jeremy Prokosch (Palance) to doctor the script for an international blockbuster, based on Homer's *Odyssey*, being directed by Fritz Lang (Lang himself). Shortly after Paul is hired, in the ruins of a once bustling Italian studio (Cinecittà) that has just been sold, the writer insists that Camille ride in Prokosch's red Alfa Romeo to the producer's

villa outside Rome while he follows in a taxi; this flip gesture sparks the protracted on-again, off-again quarrel between Camille and Paul in their flat that takes up almost a third of the film—roughly half an hour out of 101 minutes.

The action shifts to Capri, where the film of the *Odyssey* is being shot and the remainder of *Contempt* unfolds, charting the growing estrangement between the couple and Prokosch's interest in an affair with Camille. Because Paul and Camille speak only French and Prokosch speaks only English (while Lang speaks German, French, and English but little Italian), Prokosch's assistant, Francesca (Giorgia Moll), plays a key role as interpreter. (She also figures at times as Prokosch's abused mistress, and Paul makes a halfhearted pass at her, which Camille observes, at Prokosch's villa.)

In an early treatment for *Contempt*, Godard describes Paul as a character from Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* who wants to be a character in Hawks's *Rio Bravo*. He also indicates that the first time you see John Wayne in *Rio Bravo* you don't care where he went to school or what his father does for a living; all that matters—and all that defines him—is what he does in the present. This description essentially translates the Homeric hero into movie terms, and it helps explain why even packing a gun doesn't suffice to make Paul an Odysseus.

Though *Contempt* is about a good deal more than filmmaking, Godard's extended career as a film critic—which started in 1950 and continued well beyond the time of his early features—informs the movie at every turn. Considering a few of his major sources indicates how broad and educated his conception of cinema was at the time:

1. Michelangelo Antonioni. Paul and Camille's exhaustive as well as exhausting scene in their significantly unfinished and mainly white-walled flat is in many ways the sequel to an almost equally protracted scene between Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg in *Breathless*, though that was essentially a long seduction and this is a chronicle of growing disaffection. Unquestionably Antonioni, whom Godard interviewed at length in 1964, is the ruling influence on this scene—on its casual detachment from both characters, novelistic psychological ambiguities, attenuated sense of duration, and remarkable feeling for the ebb and flow of a troubled relationship. Back in 1964, when I was blind to the Antonioni influence, I was turned off by Paul's macho insensitivity and what I perceived as Godard's uncritical identification with it; today I'm more inclined to read the same sequence as a profound autocritique.

Much as Antonioni was charting aspects of his relationship with Monica Vitti in all his films of this period (*L'avventura*, *La notte*, *Eclipse*, *Red Desert*), Godard

was examining his relationship with Anna Karina in most of the films that immediately preceded and followed *Contempt* (*Le petit soldat*, *A Woman Is a Woman*, and *Vivre sa vie* beforehand, and *Band of Outsiders*, *Alphaville*, *Pierrot le fou*, and *Made in U.S.A.* afterward). In *Contempt* Godard has Bardot put on a Karina-like black wig at two separate points during the quarrel between Paul and Camille. (Antonioni has a similar wig-changing scene in *L'avventura.*) It's unfortunate that Kauffmann—who was one of Antonioni's earliest and most passionate American defenders—regarded Godard's masterful protracted sequence in *Contempt* as bankrupt. To me it's the emotional and thematic core of the film, in part because it registers with much of the same personal urgency as Antonioni's films with and about Vitti. (The same urgency, incidentally, can be found in Roberto Rossellini's films of the 50s with Ingrid Bergman, especially *Viaggio in Italia.*)

2. Joseph Mankiewicz's *The Quiet American* (1958). Mankiewicz was the subject of the first piece of film criticism Godard ever published; Godard also expressed his admiration for this very writerly filmmaker as recently as the 1990 *Nouvelle vague.* Their affinity isn't hard to understand: between the two of them, Mankiewicz and Godard have probably made the talkiest movies in the history of cinema. *The Quiet American*—which Godard wrote about in 1958, declaring it the best film of that year—is not only a precedent for Godard's epigrammatic dialogue but, more important, the inspiration for casting Moll (who plays Mankiewicz's Vietnamese heroine) and for Godard's fascination with the process of translation. In a key sequence in Mankiewicz's far from faithful adaptation of Graham Greene's anti-American novel, the middle-aged journalist (Michael Redgrave) who lives with Moll serves as translator between his French-speaking mistress and the English-speaking Audie Murphy, a younger and more idealistic American character who actually proposes to her during this scene. Moreover, Redgrave's feeling about Murphy—which confuses sexual envy, anti-Americanism, personal differences, and moral revulsion—forecasts Paul's own muddled attitude toward Prokosch and the prospect of selling out.

3, 4, and 5. Fritz Lang's *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* (1959) and Jean-Daniel Pollet's *Méditerranée* (1963). Alas, none of these extraordinary films is available in the United States.[1] All three explain a great deal about *Contempt*—especially the film's treatment of Lang and the enigmatic film within a film he's shooting. The two Lang films, which together constitute a single work, were international superproductions shot in Germany and India; they combine a consciously naïve, fairy-tale form of storytelling with Lang's rigorous, almost abstract approach to design, framing, and editing. Though both were popular successes elsewhere, here they were released only as a dubbed, truncated, re-edited single feature, *Journey to the Lost City*, which Lang disowned and barely anyone noticed. Though today Godard and his *Cahiers du cinéma* colleagues are

cited mainly as the first critics to regard Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock as serious artists, in some ways their critical defense of Lang's two Indian films—which was harder for most others, including Lang himself, to swallow—is even more important. Most critics regarded these films as pathetic and degrading hackwork by a once prestigious director, almost as if someone like Ingmar Bergman had directed the current *Kull the Conqueror*—despite the fact that Lang was filming a script he'd coauthored in Germany in the 20s. By contrast, the *Cahiers* critics (among them Luc Moullet, whose book on Lang Camille is reading and quoting from in the bathtub in *Contempt*) argued that Lang remained absolutely true to his vision and principles in these films. As one later French critic, Raymond Bellour, put it, they reveal "an inability to lie carried to the point of tragedy"; in a similar spirit, I've argued elsewhere that they feature the only cave in movies worthy of Plato's.[2] But the tawdry commercial aspects of these films blinded most critics to their honesty, integrity, and exquisite beauty, which explains their continuing absence here even on video. Yet these films are what support not only the notion of a Lang version of the *Odyssey* but Lang's position in *Contempt* as the only uncorrupted and incorruptible figure.

Yet it seems Godard remained incapable of doing something truly Langian in the film within a film, except through a kind of abstraction. (He does a much better job of evoking Lang's geometrical visual style in an overhead shot of Paul climbing the steps of Prokosch's villa—actually Curzio Malaparte's—in Capri, which harks all the way back to the Tower of Babel sequence in *Metropolis*.) Though Godard aims to evoke the lucid approach toward antiquity and the cosmos he associates with Lang, he's guided by the very different example of Pollet's 42-minute experimental film—the focus of a dreamy reverie on antiquity that Godard wrote at about the same time he was making *Contempt*. Pollet's seminal *Méditerranée* cuts repeatedly between meditative camera movements around various subjects—Greek ruins, a Sicilian garden, a Spanish bullfight, a woman on a hospital cart, a fisherman—conjuring up a great many mysteries about their relation to one another. Seen today, Pollet's plotless film looks a good deal like many of the lyrical interludes in *Contempt*.

6. Vincente Minnelli's *Some Came Running* (1959). When Paul takes a bath wearing a hat and smoking a cigar, he cites Dean Martin in *Some Came Running* as his noble precedent. In fact a good many of the stylistic features of Minnelli's 50s and 60s melodramas anticipate *Contempt*—most strikingly the bold color coding, reflected in Godard's use of matching yellow bathrobes to link Francesca and Camille to Prokosch, and elsewhere in his vibrant, emotional use of red and blue in the décor. More important, Godard at times gives big-time filmmaking (Hollywood in *The Bad and the Beautiful*, Cinecittà in *Two Weeks in Another Town*) the same satirical and grandiloquent treatment as Minnelli.

Much as William Faulkner once credited his success as a novelist to his failure as a lyric poet and Dizzy Gillespie explained his early trumpet style as an abortive attempt to imitate Roy Eldridge, what Godard can't do is fundamental to what he winds up doing. If *Contempt* invents a new way of thinking about the world—combining the whole complicated business of shooting a movie with reflections on antiquity and modernity, love and filmmaking, sound and image, art and commerce, thoughts and emotions, and four different languages and cultures—it arrives at this vision mainly through a series of detours and roadblocks. Indeed, it might be argued that Godard fails as a storyteller, as an entertainer, as an essayist, and as a film critic in the very process of succeeding as an artist.

How does he fail as a film critic? *Contempt* begins and ends by showing the execution of a particular tracking shot. The first of these accompanies Francesca down a patch of the Cinecittà back lot while a male voice, after reciting the film's major credits, intones the following: "'The cinema,' André Bazin said, 'substitutes for our gaze a world that corresponds to our desires.' *Contempt* is the story of this world." Godard is clearly fond of this quotation, because he cites it again in both *Histoire(s) du cinéma* and his latest feature, *For Ever Mozart*. But as far as I've been able to determine, neither the quotation nor the attribution is correct. A likelier source is a much wordier passage by the controversial *Cahiers du cinéma* critic Michel Mourlet. One of the most passionate defenders of Lang's Indian films, he wrote in 1959, several months after Bazin's death: "Since cinema is a gaze which is substituted for our own in order to give us a world that corresponds to our desires, it settles on faces, on radiant or bruised but always beautiful bodies, on this glory or this devastation which testifies to the same primordial nobility, on this chosen race that we recognize as our own, the ultimate projection of life towards God."

How does Godard fail as a storyteller and entertainer? The plot of *Contempt* proceeds by fits and starts over an afternoon in Rome and a morning in Capri, interrupted by constant digressions and labyrinthine ruminations. Palance as Prokosch is a screaming caricature of an oracular producer, Bardot the unlikeliest "former typist" imaginable. We're supposed to revere Lang as a great artist, but the rushes of the film he's purportedly making look simply awful. At one point Piccoli packs a gun, but he never winds up doing anything with it. When two of the characters die at the end in a car crash, Godard can't even bring himself to show us the accident; we only hear it offscreen, then see an awkwardly posed shot of the wrecked car and passengers that resembles a freakish piece of modernist sculpture. Sometimes Godard eliminates the sound track entirely (except for the repeated motifs of Georges Delerue's score, which Scorsese recently used in *Casino*); in one sequence, at a noisy audition in a movie theater, he periodically

turns off the ambient sound in order to let us hear the dialogue. In countless other ways Godard calls attention to his technique, thereby preventing us from simply following the story as story: he moves the camera back and forth between the quarreling Paul and Camille, periodically cuts to seemingly unmotivated flashbacks, fantasies, and even a flash-forward (most of which account for the three minutes deleted in the original American release), and even adds a blue or red filter in the middle of takes.

How does Godard fail as an essayist? By refusing to pursue a single linear argument or even theme, even when he isn't telling a story, spattering his dialogue with Wise Sayings and assorted quotes from Dante, Hölderlin, Brecht, and even Lang, inserting gratuitous film references anywhere and everywhere. (We find out what's playing at the theaters in Rome: *Rio Bravo* and *Bigger than Life*. We see posters for *Hatari!*, *Psycho*, *Vanina Vanini*, and *Vivre sa vie*. We also know what's playing at the theater where the auditions are being held: *Viaggio in Italia*.)

And how does Godard succeed as an artist? By turning the above mess into a discourse with its own kind of necessity, wasting nothing. Bazin might not have been the source of the film's opening quote, but as the Socratic inquisitor into what cinema was, he should have been. The broken rhythms of the storytelling in *Contempt* and the frequent slippages between stars and characters, characters and caricatures, films and ideas about films, incidents and ideas about incidents all point to innovative ways of thinking, as Godard enters the material from different angles to tease out its hidden meanings. And if these meanings take the form of a cubist mosaic rather than a linear narrative or argument, that's because stories and essays take us only part of the way in perceiving the modern world and its contradictions.

Erich Auerbach in "Odysseus' Scar"—the first chapter of his *Mimesis*, and the best piece of literary criticism that I know—makes an extended comparison between the style of Homer and the style of the Old Testament:

> On the one hand [meaning Homer], externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feeling completely expressed; events taking place in a leisurely fashion and with very little suspense. On the other hand [in the Old Testament], the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for

interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and "fraught with background."

If *Contempt* has a single, overarching subject it's the aching distance between the two styles Auerbach outlines and the two ways of perceiving the world they imply. Using these styles more broadly to describe antiquity and modernity, it should be obvious that *Contempt* is not simply a look at antiquity from the vantage point of modernity—*Fellini Satyricon* is closer to that. *Contempt* is something more nearly akin to the reverse: a look at ourselves as we might appear to the Greek gods. Layering one antithetical style over another—classical over modern—Godard necessarily produces a work shot through with contradictions. In terms of Auerbach's two modes, Godard's serene camera movements and the film's lush, melancholy score stand in for Homeric style, as do various other signifiers of epic and odyssey. But what his camera is traversing (including the Mediterranean, as in the final shot) and what the score accompanies is generally fraught with turbulence, whether it's obvious or not.

Godard, playing Lang's assistant director in the film, has the last word, heard over the final tracking movement across the sea, a final command to the film crew, "Silence," as the camera starts rolling—a command that's then translated into Italian. Godard's view of serenity and continuity is necessarily splintered, because the modern world is a Tower of Babel where languages and discourses compete for mastery over a purity that eludes our grasp. Not even silence is unmediated. There's a French silence, an Italian silence, a German silence, and an American silence—maybe even a Greek silence, which the film prefers to remain silent about.

—*Chicago Reader*, September 5, 1997

NOTES

1. Happily the two Lang films have recently become available in excellent prints on separate DVDs released by Fantoma. [2002]

2. "East Coast Journal," *Film Comment* 12, no. 3 (May–June 1975); reprinted in *Moving Places: A Life at the Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 185–86.

Remember Amnesia? (Guy Maddin's *Archangel*)

Amnesia is a subject we associate with film noir of the 40s and 50s, and social commentators tend to link its use in such films—with their gloomy and murky moods, their amnesiac heroes' helplessness—to some version of postwar angst. Now it appears that amnesia—both as subject and as metaphor—is making a minor comeback as a postmodernist theme. An early instance of this trend can be found in the fate of Tyrone Slothrop, the hero of Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, who gradually gets phased out of the book as a visible presence once he starts shifting his attention from his inscrutable, troubling past to his immediate present. We learn that "personal density is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth. . . . Temporal bandwidth is the width of your present, your now . . . [and] the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. It may even get to where you're having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes ago, or even—as Slothrop now—what you're doing *here*, at the base of this colossal curved embankment."

It's a paradoxical hallmark of postmodernist art to be preoccupied with certain aspects of the past while being closed off—whether through indifference or ignorance or (real or metaphorical) amnesia—to certain other aspects. *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, is both a well-researched historical novel set during World War II and a contemporary meditation on history couched in the language, idioms, and sensibility of the late 60s and early 70s. MTV, which offers a sort of Cook's tour through the history of film style, is generally both attentive to the surface appearance of various styles and blind to their historical contexts and meanings. Similarly, when Woody Allen in *Bananas* (1971) or Brian De Palma in *The Untouchables* (1987) alludes to the Odessa steps / baby carriage sequence in Eisenstein's *Potemkin* (1925), the effect is to remove Eisenstein's baby carriage from its historical context. (The fact that *Bananas* is set in the present and *The Untouchables* is set in 1930 is irrelevant; both films occupy a "now" that's almost as narrow as Slothrop's.)

Archangel—the second feature of Guy Maddin, a Canadian independent based in Winnipeg, whose *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* turned up a year and a half ago—is set during World War I and the Russian Revolution. Filmed, like its

predecessor, in dreamy, murky, and nostalgic black and white, with a quaintly dubbed and muffled sound track, it both looks and sounds like an arty studio picture from the late silent or early sound era. Yet the superimposition of a late-20s / early-30s style over a story set around 1917 yields a movie that is oddly ahistorical and that seems set adrift from any sustained sense of place, time, or even meaning. The film's true subject, in fact—if it has one at all—is amnesia: virtually all the major characters suffer from it acutely, to such a degree that they can barely grasp their own identities—or anyone else's, for that matter. And the film induces a kind of existential free fall in the spectator that is oddly akin to the helplessness of the characters.

The fascinating thing about *Archangel* is that, although it was cowritten by a film academic, George Toles,[1] it hardly seems aware of its own identity, in spite of the fact that it is original and distinctive—even more so than the superficially similar (if funnier and gorier) *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*, which can more easily be palmed off as an arcane offshoot of David Lynch's *Eraserhead*. *Archangel* isn't consistently a comedy or a work of facetious camp or a serious drama, although it may occasionally come across as all three—sometimes all three at once. Theoretically, comedy and drama represent separate emotional registers, with camp occupying some ambiguous no-man's-land between them. But the tone of *Archangel* is so private and hermetic that it allows the viewer equal access—or equal lack of access—to all these registers at any given moment. The result is that one can never remain firmly inside any one of these emotional attitudes but instead drifts, rather like the film itself—gliding over each of the emotional possibilities in a state of perpetual detachment and bemusement.

Consider the film's eerie opening: light snowflakes fall past antique-looking credits while we hear a tolling bell and muffled rifle shots. Then two quaint intertitles appear: "For certain soldiers / lately dead / a reverent dirge / shall here be said" and "The Dirge of Lt. John Boles." Cut to a close-up of Boles himself (Kyle McCulloch) under falling snowflakes; the camera pans down, first to the urn labeled "Iris" that he clutches with both hands beside a ship's railing, then to his legs, one of which is wooden. "Good-bye, Iris," we hear him say offscreen, shortly after he fingers her ashes inside the urn.

Boles looks to the right, where the captain stands with two women, taking various objects from them and tossing them overboard. A little later, the captain takes the urn from Boles and tosses that overboard, too. The men exchange stiff salutes, Boles exits, and a close-up shows the captain watching his departure.

Then, over organ music, the word "love" appears and grows larger on the black screen, while a male narrator delivers the following monologue with all the

glum sincerity of the commentator in Edward D. Wood Jr.'s *Glen or Glenda?*: "Love—what do we know of love? We know a baby loves with all its tiny heart"—close-up of a baby in soft focus—"and is loved in return by hearts as simple and as pure. We know a growing child thrives on love"—several kitschy shots of doting parents, family members, and a toddler with a pet dog—"and with its generous limbs apportions that love to the rest of the world."

As the monologue continues, brief shots continue to illustrate it on a point-by-point basis: "One is said to love a place, a thing, an idea" is given three shots, one each for the last three nouns; "You love your country and your liberty" is given two shots. "And, of course, there is the greatest love of all—that of a gentle soul in thoughtful prayer" is accorded no less than seven separate shots of people praying. "Then there is pride or self-love—a malignant vanity, insatiable—the pride of the Teuton" ushers in a succession of images bursting into flames: soldiers ripping apart paintings, a little boy with an apple on his head killed by a firing squad, a corpse's neck devoured by a savage warrior, demonic shadows, close-ups of grief-stricken victims, and, finally, multiple images of a single bestial soldier that circle the screen.

This passage on "love" may sound like a hoot and some of it is certainly hilarious, but the overall style is too doggedly pictorial to register as a simple send-up. It's almost as if Maddin set out to construct a piece of camp and then got lost in the images themselves, forgetting his initial project.

From any conventional standpoint, some of the film's technique is slapdash. While Maddin is often adept at faking the look of late silents and early talkies—smearing the edges of the lens with Vaseline to get blurry and dreamlike effects, using various forms of superimposition, working with shadows and silhouettes, and even employing what appears to be rear-projection to get some moving scenery behind a carriage—the dubbing is variable (sometimes disembodied, occasionally out of sync), the editing is frequently abrupt and clunky, some of the special effects are grade Z, and the story telling periodically becomes incoherent. Whether these flaws derive from some perverse master strategy—a desire to imitate the look and sound of battered, spliced prints of old movies—or whether they can be ascribed to technical inadequacies or indifference is impossible to determine. But it's part of the film's singularity that one may wind up questioning whether any of these distinctions matter very much.

Boles—a Canadian soldier in the Russian arctic, fighting on the side of the White Russians against Lenin's Bolsheviks and Kaiser Wilhelm's Huns—meets a Rus-

sian nurse named Veronkha (Kathy Marykuca) whom he confuses with the dead Iris. Veronkha has been married to a Belgian aviator named Philbin (Ari Cohen), whose memory appears to be even more impaired than Boles's, and she claims she got the marriage annulled after she caught Philbin with a chambermaid on their wedding night and discovered that he couldn't even remember that he was married. Eventually, Veronkha herself becomes so confused that she thinks Boles is actually Philbin. To make matters even murkier, Boles's landlady, Danchuk (Sarah Neville), married to the cowardly (at least that's what we're told) and obese Jannings (Michael Gottli), falls in love with Boles. Boles falls in love with her, too, though he loves her less than he loves Veronkha and loves Veronkha less than he loves the dead Iris—at least insofar as he can determine which is which.

Needless to say, the viewer winds up sharing some of this amnesiac confusion about who is who and what exactly is going on. We're not even sure, for instance, that Jannings—the only adult male we see who isn't fighting at the front—is a coward; after a Bolshevik intruder slashes Jannings's stomach and his intestines (in the form of link sausages) spill out, he stuffs some of them back into his stomach and then strangles the intruder with one intestine that's still hanging out before he dies himself. Later, after Jannings's son Genza is shot on the battlefield and dies declaring, "How sweet it is to die for one's country," his father's ghost greets his ghost to explain that Jannings's death wasn't cowardly after all.

As to the war, the reasons anyone is fighting are made to seem either absurd or impenetrable. (Genza's dying words are given no more credence than Jannings's alleged cowardice, and neither Boles nor Philbin is lucid enough to be believed either.) Like *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*, the movie abounds in dotty folklore that sounds at least half-invented—Boles successfully treats Genza's apoplexy with a horse brush—and proposes no form of higher wisdom.

Flashbacks, dream sequences, and unexplained fantasy and SF details (a minor hailstorm of bunny rabbits falls into the trenches; a couple of unexplained Jules Verne contraptions turn up in the town of Archangel) wind up seeming as real—or as unreal—as the Russian Revolution or World War I; the dead and unseen Iris has as much presence and importance as the living and visible Veronkha and Danchuk; and the status of *Archangel* itself as pastiche, parody, or autonomous narrative is equally uncertain. This ambiguity and amnesiac drift becomes formally as well as thematically a definition of what the movie is all about—a detached (if poignant) fever-dream in which spectators and characters become equally lost, to their bemused pleasure and edification.

—*Chicago Reader*, March 1, 1991

Afterword: Ten Years Later (Please Watch Carefully: *The Heart of the World*)

It lasts only about seven minutes, making it roughly comparable in length to a Bugs Bunny cartoon, but Guy Maddin's *The Heart of the World*—which opens this week at Landmark's Century Centre with *The Last Resort*—conjures up a universe so vast and wacky that anyone can get lost in it. Like any film released in February, it has a very poor chance of getting an Oscar, because the Academy Awards nominators—who know better than anyone how such honors are designed to sell more than evaluate—don't want to consider many candidates released before Thanksgiving. But for my money it's better than any of the current best-feature nominees. It has more action and is quite a bit funnier. I'd even call it inexhaustible.

Maddin's movie premiered last September at the Toronto Film Festival, which had commissioned it as one of several "preludes" by leading Canadian filmmakers to run unannounced before the features, a series designed to celebrate the festival's twenty-fifth anniversary. It was commonly regarded as the best film shown at this gala event, though I'm not sure I'd go quite that far. Jia Zhang-ke's *Platform*, which might be the greatest film ever to come out of mainland China, surely has an edge over it. Yet I was delighted to join my colleagues in the National Society of Film Critics in selecting this pocket masterpiece as the best experimental film of 2000.

It's not an experimental film in any normal sense—unless one thinks of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, a work with which it has a few unexpected glancing affinities. But then there's nothing remotely normal about any of the Maddin films I've seen, all of which were made in Winnipeg and appear to have penetrating if indirect things to say about Canada, allegorically or otherwise. *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1988), his first feature, looks Nordic, surrealistic, and (deceptively) like early David Lynch, at least in its handling of gore. *Archangel* (1990), stranger and better, has something to do with amnesiac victims of mustard gas during World War I and the Russian Revolution. *Careful* (1992) is his first color film and uses subdued pastels and tinting; it's set in a remote Alpine village seething with incest where everyone speaks in whispers to avoid setting off avalanches, and it's plainly the most hilarious movie ever made about Canadian repression. *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (1997), in more conventional color, was the first Maddin feature to disappoint me, despite the presence of Shelley Duvall and Frank Gorshin, an ostrich ranch, and a classic Maddinesque romantic triangle. There are also earlier Maddin shorts—Caelum Vatnsdal's *Kino Delirium: The Films of Guy Maddin* (2000) lists fifteen titles—of which I've seen only the relatively minor *The Dead Father* (1986) and *Odilon Redon* (1995).

All of these features, especially the first three, bear some visible or audible relation to the textures and rhythms of late silent movies and early talkies, and *The Heart of the World* blatantly displays the same fascination, harking back to Russian silents of the 20s, though some of the (unobtrusive) sound effects belong mainly to other countries and the early 30s. (New York programmer Mark McElhatten also plausibly cites as a possible source *Koko's Earth Control*, a silent cartoon by the Fleischer brothers.) But a closer look at *The Heart of the World* reveals that what's being evoked isn't so much those black-and-white movies—certainly not when they were released and first seen—as it is

the experience of seeing them today in scratched, duped, and jumpy prints, looking and sounding as if they'd been filtered through layers of gauze, jerking forward in hiccups past missing frames. "Looking" may be the operative term here considering that the opening shot, which recurs in variant forms, is of a single eye peeping out at us; whether this is intended to be a mirror reflection of our own gaze or someone else's voyeurism is one of the film's enduring mysteries.

The driving, pounding momentum of the piano, percussion, and orchestra accompaniment helps foster the impression of a silent-movie screening. The title also calls to mind D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1918)—a propaganda effort that had been intended to persuade America to enter World War I—though a likelier, if still remote, silent model would be a futurist Soviet space opera made six years later, Yakov Protazanov's *Aelita*, which anticipates *Metropolis* in a few particulars. The characters all have Russian names, and another Russian detail—more self-referential than anything else in the movie—is the intertitle "kino," the Russian word for "film," repeated as a kind of punchy punctuation at least six times in the closing stretches. (Responding to this aggressiveness, Mike Rubin aptly noted in the *Village Voice*, "I could watch this film every morning as a substitute for coffee.")

Maddin's opus is set exclusively on earth, though as its title suggests, part of the action transpires underground. Phallic objects abound, including a long telescope, a strange rocket launcher or cannon equipped with balls, and a narrow tunnel leading to the earth's center, down which the heroine falls, much as Lewis Carroll's Alice falls down the rabbit hole.

The writer-director-cinematographer-coeditor's squib on this film, characteristically arch and serious at the same time, bears quoting in full, even if he gets the running time wrong: "I'm sorry! I've abused this Prelude—turned it into a soapbox for my tireless campaign to redeem melodrama. Without anyone suspecting a thing, I've jammed tiny, microscopically fleeting plot twists between the images of my ostensible movie presentation, deviously submerging in this way an entire feature film, all in a mere five minutes—the world's first subliminal melodrama! Please watch carefully."

"Microscopically fleeting" says it all—explaining even why the overall impression of this film as a mocking pastiche of Russian "cine-fist" strategies often isn't sustained by the eclecticism of the framing and cutting. Maybe the "now you see it, now you don't" tactics contained in the scattershot editing and wildly darting and divergent camera movements conjure up one of the basic organizational principles of the Russian silents, from Kuleshov to Pudovkin to Eisenstein to Vertov—the idea that rapid notations and surreal juxtapositions oblige spectators to fill in the blanks. Yet Maddin's arrangement of images and movements may be even more abstract than the Russian montage sequences that inspired him: some intertitles move across the screen or grow larger or get combined with images, and brief bursts of animation are devoted to abstruse mathematical formulas and diagrams of the globe. The net result appears to have less to do with a consistent style or content than with the overall effect such procedures have on one's melodramatic imagination. But because this is a thinking person's postmodernism, the surface effects and their teasing allegorical implications remain in the forefront.

Intertitles punctuating introductory portraits of the main characters in oval cameos—

a device familiar from serials made in the teens—introduce us to two brothers, Nikolai ("youth, mortician") and Osip ("an actor playing Christ in the Passion Play"). These characters quickly become (I'm using slash marks to indicate divisions between shots or sequences) "two brothers" / "two brothers who love . . ." / "who love" / "the same . . ." / "brothers love the same . . ." / "woman." Moreover, we discover that "Anna, state scientist," who completes this particular Maddinesque romantic triangle, "loves BOTH brothers" and "studies THE EARTH'S CORE," / "the VERY heart of the world"—until she discovers, several shots later, that "the world is dying of heart failure!" Still unable to choose between the brothers, she swoons melodramatically in the presence of a newly arrived "dark horse," "Akmatov, the industrialist"—a fat cigar smoker equipped with pince-nez and moneybags who fetishistically fingers coins and who apparently provokes "the World's Fatal Heart Attack!" once he has the unconscious Anna in his clutches.

Each of the above intertitles is separated from the next by rapid montages—brief shots sprayed at the viewer like bullets—that has provoked some commentators to think of Eisenstein. But in spite of Akmatov, who could have stepped straight out of *Strike* or *October*, no Eisenstein movie ever displayed the stuttering syntax of Maddin's intertitles as they lurch drunkenly through a single sentence or the chaotic discontinuities of his flashy camera movements and cuts, which often become a form of gibberish. This jumble of effects suggests Eisenstein only because the shots hurtle by without leaving us time to think or pause for breath; look at the film more closely, as I was able to do because I had a video copy, and you discover how the film's breathing overtakes ours. It's quickly apparent that Maddin's splintered allegorical narrative and diverse spastic effects follow obscure laws that are entirely their own.

This is a film we have to chase after, but no matter how many times we view it we can never catch up. It will probably hold as many mysteries the twelfth time you see it as the first—making it more prizeworthy than any number of conventional and conventionally racist and xenophobic drug thrillers (which blame contemporary drug problems on Mexicans and blacks rather than on, say, governments, including onetime presidents and CIA directors).[2] As for what this film is "really" about, maybe I'll have a better idea after I've seen it twenty times. An apocalyptic, millennial statement about the death of cinema (signaled at the end by the word "kino" and the sound of a film projector slowing and stopping) and of the environment (suggested by the plunges beneath the earth's surface) is one possibility, and I'm sure there are others, most of them funnier.

—*Chicago Reader*, February 23, 2001

NOTES

1. Toles also cowrote Maddin's *Careful* (1992), wrote his *Sea Beggars* (1994) and *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* (1997), and wrote about collaborating with Maddin in his collection *A House Made of Light* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), pp. 319–34). [2002]

2. Needless to say, I was thinking of *Traffic*. [2002]

Ragged but Right

Rivette's *Up Down Fragile*

> The inspiration of *Up Down Fragile?* The MGM low-budget films of the 50s that were shot in four or five weeks on sets left over from other films. In particular, a Stanley Donen movie, *Give a Girl a Break* [1953], a simple film shot in next to no time with short dance numbers. —Jacques Rivette in an interview

> Entertainment does not . . . present models of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Sir Thomas More, William Morris et al. Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. —Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia"

Out of Jacques Rivette's seventeen features to date—in which I include his twelve-hour serial *Out 1* (1970) as well as both parts of his *Jeanne la pucelle* (1994)—nine are set in contemporary Paris. And few other movies I can think of infuse that city with the same kind of distilled, everyday poetry. For Rivette, Paris is a city of secrets and puzzles, of hidden alliances and privileged locations—a park bench here, a courtyard there—forming the nexus of magical encounters.

In a way, the title of Rivette's *Paris Belongs to Us* says it all. Solitude and togetherness are the two great themes of his work, often intertwined like the melodic lines of a fugue, and Paris often seems to function as the orchestra that performs and places those melodies, charts their coexistence and their interplay. A city that in many ways seems designed, choreographed, and even lit to provide the settings for romantic musicals—as evidenced in such films as *An American in Paris* and *Funny Face*—Paris belongs to loners, couples, and groups, all of whom bring something sad or euphoric to the city as well as take something away from it. It's a kind of give-and-take we often associate with characters in a musical, interacting singly or collectively but always romantically with their environment.

Haut bas fragile (*Up Down Fragile*)—a 1995 release receiving its U.S. theatrical premiere at the Music Box this week because no New York theater has been willing to give it a run—is the first of Rivette's films to literally profit from Paris's ideal qualifications as the setting for a musical. One of the privileged sites is the alleyway outside a delivery service called Vitébien (which one could translate roughly as "Quick 'n' Spiffy"), where Ninon (Nathalie Richard), one of the three

youthful heroines, parks her moped and chats with her coworkers between deliveries (the movie's title alludes to the instructions often stamped on parcels). Because the film is set during the summer, doors and windows tend to remain open, and part of what makes this spot a magical nexus, with pathways stretching out in all directions, are such proximate details as an upstairs neighbor who calls down to people in the alley and the adjacent office and a nearby atelier, where Roland—the closest thing this movie has to a male hero (and André Marcon is a dead ringer at moments for Gene Kelly)—works as a set designer.

The location reminds me of the courtyard in Jean Renoir's *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* and other such hangouts in populist French movies of the 30s. But if this alleyway seems like the relaxed setting for a proletarian musical, other locations suggest different classes. The movie's upper-crust heroine, Louise (Marianne Denicourt)—who's just settling in at a Paris hotel after several years in a coma in a provincial clinic—tends to gravitate toward decorous settings in and around parks; one of her favorite spots is a bench on the rue du Moulin de la Pointe that seems to have been designed for Leslie Caron. The third heroine, Ida (Laurence Cote), is neither working-class nor wealthy: she's a librarian at the Library of Decorative Arts, where Roland sometimes goes for research. Like Louise she favors parks, but less decorous portions of them. We often find her at a stand selling crepes and hot dogs, where early in the movie she flees from a crazy-looking man named Monsieur Paul who asks, "Haven't I seen you before?" (Rivette himself plays the man, and the fact that he cast Cote in *The Gang of Four* may be part of the joke. The fact that in real life he's a solitaire like her character—her doppelgänger in a way—may be equally pertinent.)

Ninon and Louise get to know each other, and both of them get to know Roland; each has a musical number with the other two. But Ida tends to remain on the fringes of their separate and interlocking stories, in musical as well as narrative terms. All three actresses created their own characters—a procedure Rivette also followed in *Out 1* and *Céline and Julie Go Boating*. And just as Jean-Pierre Léaud and Juliet Berto are solitaires in *Out 1* and Julie is one in *Céline and Julie* before she meets Céline, Ida in *Up Down Fragile* might be described as someone who'd like to be in a musical but can't because she doesn't yet know who she is. The adopted daughter of provincial parents whose letters she doesn't answer, she's obsessed with fantasies about who her real mother might be and with tracking down a song from her early childhood, of which she remembers only fragments. (Eventually her obsession leads to a meeting with Sarah, a cabaret singer, played by Anna Karina, whom we've already seen in scenes with Ninon and Louise.) Narratively and musically, Ida's in a perpetual state of becoming—the only creature to whom she's attached is a cat. Meanwhile, the other lines in the fugue are the processes by which Ninon and Louise acquire romance and

friendship and thereby work their way into musical numbers, all of them various kinds of duets.

A few glosses to the quotations at the head of this review: Apparently the only set in *Up Down Fragile* "left over" from another film—indeed, the only set at all—is Roland's atelier, which I'm told is the studio soundstage Rivette used for interiors in the two previous features that make up *Jeanne la pucelle*. The only other relevance of *Give a Girl a Break* to *Up Down Fragile* of which I'm aware is the fact that each film has three heroines and three interlocking miniplots. As for the Richard Dyer quote, I think one could argue that *Up Down Fragile* not only tells us a lot about what utopia would feel like, it also tells us a little about how it would be organized.

A whole hour of *Up Down Fragile* passes before the first song-and-dance number. But during that hour Rivette takes a lot of steps—in metaphysical, stylistic, musical, directorial, and choreographic terms—tracing the passage between real life and musical numbers. The same sort of steps are taken throughout the remaining hour and a half of *Up Down Fragile*, sometimes leading up to or away from musical numbers, sometimes not.

The metaphysical, stylistic, musical, and directorial steps Rivette takes have everything to do with his legacy as a film critic, despite the fact that he wrote and published criticism only between 1950 and 1969. As the most indefatigable moviegoer of all the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics who became directors—a distinguished group including Olivier Assayas, Leos Carax, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Luc Moullet, Eric Rohmer, André Téchiné, and François Truffaut, among others—he knows MGM musicals like the back of his hand. But he doesn't express his knowledge in specific homages or references the way an American cinephile normally would. For Rivette this knowledge is precious because it enhances and poeticizes real life, not because it offers an alternative or escape.

Consequently the movie has a documentary roughness—a respect for real durations, for moments that are empty as well as full—that would have been unthinkable in a 50s MGM musical. Moreover, none of the songs is especially memorable, either melodically or in terms of performance (it's no surprise that there isn't a sound-track album), nor is any of the dancing up to snuff by Hollywood standards. Indeed, some European critics have dismissed *Up Down Fragile* for precisely these reasons, and I have little doubt many of their American counterparts would do the same.

Tough luck for them. Though I'm sure the movie would be better if it had a better score, I'm less certain about the virtues that "professional" dancers and singers would have provided; I suppose it's all a matter of how they'd be used. When Louise finally gets acquainted with Lucien (Bruno Todeschini)—a lovable nebbish who's been awkwardly shadowing her at the behest of her wealthy off-

screen father (Laszlo Szabo)—their romance finally blossoms inside and nearby a park pavilion in a song and a series of struck poses and dance turns, all of them delightfully amateurish.

This number, my favorite in the movie, reminds me of both a particular park pavilion and the irrepressible youthful giddiness in *I Love Melvin* (1953), a deliciously modest MGM musical with Donald O'Connor and Debbie Reynolds directed by Don Weis. The fact that Todeschini has none of O'Connor's technique as a dancer and that Denicourt has none of Reynolds's slickness as a singer isn't a liability but one of Rivette's givens, and he builds the number around his actors just as sturdily as Weis built the numbers of *I Love Melvin* around his. In Rivette's case, the vulnerability, even fragility of his performers is every bit as important as the professional polish of Weis's; in both cases, the directors are using their actors as instruments for conveying euphoria. (I must confess that I also love what Joseph L. Mankiewicz did with nonsingers Marlon Brando and Jean Simmons in *Guys and Dolls*.)

O'Connor's number in the pavilion in *I Love Melvin* is a virtuoso turn performed on roller skates; Nathalie Richard in *Up Down Fragile*—the closest thing to a real dancer in Rivette's movie—makes some of her deliveries on Rollerblades, quite gracefully but without performing any of O'Connor's awesome acrobatics. Is O'Connor automatically a "better" performer than Richard, or *I Love Melvin* a "better" movie than *Up Down Fragile*? Criticizing the performances here is a bit like complaining that Thelonious Monk lacked the piano technique of Art Tatum; maybe so, but Monk still had all he needed to say what he wanted to say. Or as Duke Ellington once put it, more succinctly, "If it sounds good, it *is* good."

Rivette's numbers seem closer to life than Weis's not only because his performers are less polished but partly because he dares to prolong some of Lucien's and Louise's dance moves after the music stops, providing one kind of pathway away from the euphoric moment, and partly because he uses a real location instead of a studio set. But surely other and more mysterious stylistic differences are at play as well; in ways that are difficult to pinpoint, a whole lifetime of moviegoing seems to lurk behind the pleasures offered by this movie, a trait it shares with *Céline and Julie Go Boating*.

Admittedly, the cultivation and appreciation of technique—human as well as cinematic—stand solidly behind the glory of the Hollywood musical, and we'd all be much poorer without it. But what Rivette has that his American critical and directorial counterparts often lack is a poetic and abstract appreciation of what that technique yields and what that glory consists of, especially in relation to everyday life—an appreciation of the dialectic between reality and fantasy that's always been behind the potency of French cinema. That same dialectic also inspired Godard's third feature, *A Woman Is a Woman* (1960), which he noted at

the time was conceived as "a neorealist musical." "It's a complete contradiction," he admitted, "but this is precisely what interested me in the film. It may be an error, but it's an attractive one." In the same interview he concluded, "The film is not a musical. It's the idea of a musical."

A Woman Is a Woman has plenty of glories—rent the full-frame video sometime and you'll see what I mean—but Godard is right: it isn't a musical. *Up Down Fragile*, which derives in a way from the same idea, *is* a musical, however, because ultimately it practices what Godard's film only preaches, embodies what *A Woman Is a Woman* only theorizes about. Sometimes it's a matter of Rivette stylizing movement—the actors' as well as the camera's—and often it's simply a matter of imparting emotion; a great deal of the film's solidity as a musical has to do with the way it explores the joys and sorrows of being alone and of being with someone else. But most often it's Rivette's acute sense of what steps need to be taken to approach or retreat from a euphoric musical moment, whether romantic or friendly—how to find such steps, how to execute them, and above all how to place them in the midst of an ordinary summer afternoon or evening in Paris. In other words, not only a sense of what utopia might feel like, but also how it might be organized.

—*Chicago Reader*, July 26, 1996

Critic with a Camera

Marker on Tarkovsky

Industry flacks claim that Hollywood movies have been dumbed down out of commercial necessity—they're just giving audiences what they want. I don't buy it. Audiences aren't being offered intelligent movies, or at least those aren't the ones getting multimillion-dollar ad budgets. This was especially the case during the past summer, though as usual, most of the press tolerantly excused the fare as standard silly-season stuff—as if we and not the industry and their advertisers were responsible. The flacks may love to shift the blame by telling us how dumb we all are, but their contempt finally may be causing a minor counterreaction.

Difficult, demanding, and incorrigibly serious art movies have been becoming more popular—though that may be less the result of a backlash against Hollywood than of a growing awareness that the makers of art movies are more respectful of the seriousness, intelligence, and spirituality of moviegoers. The first solid indication of this trend I noticed was the nationwide success of a Robert Bresson retrospective, which came to the Film Center in the spring of 1999 and drew enough crowds to warrant a partial revival of the series a few months later. Another was that, according to Stephen Holden in the *New York Times*, the belated New York theatrical premiere of Krzysztof Kieslowski's ten-part, ten-hour *Decalogue* (1988) this past summer earned $247,711 during its eight-week run at the Lincoln Plaza, occasioning a repeat engagement downtown that's still going.

Here's another example of that shift. According to Martin Rubin, who joined the Film Center last February as its new associate director, the biggest crowds he's seen there since he arrived have been at the Andrei Tarkovsky retrospective in July. Since almost all of Tarkovsky's oeuvre is available on video, the people who went to see these works could have seen them on their own, but they turned out instead for the big-screen communal event.

I didn't make it to any of the screenings, though if I'd been going to movies strictly for pleasure, I probably would have attended most of them. I've seen all seven of Tarkovsky's features, some of them several times, but I've never felt anywhere close to exhausting them. I haven't seen *Andrei Rublev* (1966) for a good quarter of a century, and *The Mirror* (1974) struck me as almost completely opaque the single time I saw it. I also have to confess that most of *Stalker* (1979), now my favorite, infuriated me when I first saw it in the early 80s. With the

possible exception of *My Name Is Ivan* (also called *Ivan's Childhood*, 1962), Tarkovsky's first feature, all of his movies qualify to some degree as head scratchers. The same goes for the best films of Kieslowski and Kiarostami. As Chris Marker puts it, some filmmakers deliver sermons, but "the greats leave us with our freedom."

If we emerge from Tarkovsky's films somewhat puzzled, this is only the first of the special gifts they have to offer, for ultimately they aren't so much mysteries to be solved as experiences to be interpreted, learned from, and assimilated. Marker notes that human levitation figures in at least three Tarkovsky films—*Solaris* (1972), *The Mirror*, and *The Sacrifice* (1986)—but has a narrative justification only in the first, when the characters are in free fall in a space station. This doesn't make *Solaris* an easier film to understand than the other two, because the narrative justification winds up clouding more issues than it clarifies; Tarkovsky himself once suggested as much by implying that *Solaris* was compromised by its relation to science fiction. I should add that it was mainly my generic expectations of *Stalker*, his other so-called science fiction film, that initially infuriated me. Tarkovsky once avowed that the only genre that truly interested him was film itself. "The true cinema image is built upon the destruction of genre, upon conflict with it," he wrote in his book *Sculpting in Time*, adding that filmmakers such as Bresson, Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman, Kurosawa, Dovzhenko, Vigo, Mizoguchi, Buñuel, and even Chaplin created their own genres and that "the very concept of genre is as cold as the tomb."

Marker's 55-minute video *One Day in the Life of Andre Arsenevich* was made last year for the excellent French TV series "Cinéma de notre temps" ("Film in Our Time"). It's the best single piece of Tarkovsky criticism I know of, clarifying the overall coherence of his oeuvre while leaving all the principal mysteries in the films intact. It becomes clear early on that Marker was an intimate friend of Tarkovsky and his family, and was shooting home-video footage of some of Tarkovsky's final days in the mid-80s, when he was dying of cancer, for Tarkovsky and his family's use as well as his own. But this is handled throughout with exquisite tact and restraint and is never allowed to intrude on the poetic analysis of the features. In fact, the video interweaves biography and autobiography with poetic and political insight in a manner that seldom works as well as it does here, perhaps because personal affection and poetic analysis are rarely as compatible as Marker makes them.

Marker tapes Tarkovsky's wife, Larissa, commenting on a downpour she's been caught in, amusedly comparing it to the rain in *Stalker*, and then he has his narrator remark, over an appropriate selection of Tarkovsky clips, "It rains a lot in Tarkovsky's films, as in Kurosawa's—one of the signs, no doubt, of the Japanese sensibility he mentioned so often. And like the Japanese, a physical relationship

to nature. There's nothing more earthy, more carnal than the work of this reputed mystical filmmaker—maybe because Russian mysticism is not that of Catholics terrified by nature and body. Among the Orthodox, nature is respected, the Creator is revered through his creation, and in counterpoint to the characters, each film knits a plot between the four elements—sometimes treated separately, sometimes in pairs. In *The Mirror*, a simple camera movement brings together water and fire . . . the opposite path in *Solaris*."

Discussing the work of any filmmaker in relation to the four elements sounds like a facile activity; I recall, for instance, a rather absurd monograph published in England in the 60s or 70s that enumerated earth, air, fire, and water images in the films of Martin Ritt. But Marker persuades me that it's a wholly functional means of getting at what Tarkovsky's films are doing and at the relationship they have to one another. With a similar clinching simplicity, Marker compares what he calls the archetypal camera angle of Hollywood (slightly low, framing people against the sky) with the archetypal camera angle of Tarkovsky (slightly high, framing people against the ground), then lets all the metaphysical implications of this difference sink in.

Marker's criticism is on video rather than on film or in print—including *The Last Bolshevik* (1993), his portrait of the late Alexander Medvedkin, another Russian filmmaker friend—which seems to justify a claim Godard made to me in a 1996 interview, that criticism "is the only thing video can be and should be." Unfortunately, Godard's own supreme effort in this realm—the eight-part video series *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, completed a couple of years ago—remains unseen in the U.S. because its distributor, Gaumont, has cleared the rights to the film clips and artwork it uses only in France. (As partial compensation—apparently the rights to film sound tracks and musical samplings don't need the same kind of clearance—ECM has issued the complete sound track on CD in an expensive boxed set, along with books reproducing most of the spoken and written texts in three languages.)

Perhaps for similar reasons, most of the programs in "Cinéma de notre temps" are rarely available outside of France. Yet we're getting to see Marker's comparatively straightforward and fully accessible masterpiece fairly promptly, maybe because he had to get clearance for clips from only a few films and for a video record of Tarkovsky's London staging of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. It may also be relevant that Marker is bilingual—he has issued graceful French and English versions of most of his major films and videos since *Sans soleil* in 1982—and that he's a compulsive globe-trotter, even though he keeps a low profile.

Characteristically, the first-person narration in *One Day in the Life of Andre Arsenevich*, written by Marker, is delivered by Alexandra Stewart, the Canadian-born, Paris-based actress who performed the same function in the English version

of *Sans soleil* (similarly, Michael Pennington, not Marker, was the first-person narrator in *The Last Bolshevik*). And characteristically he has refused to assign himself—or anyone else—a directorial credit, modestly crediting himself with "video footage," "narration," and "editing."

The title plainly alludes to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1962 novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, about life in a Stalinist labor camp. Marker recounts that Tarkovsky experienced "twenty years of harassment of every sort" from the Soviet authorities, though he wasn't a political dissident but merely a Russian mystic and an unconventional filmmaker. That harassment eventually drove him into exile in Europe, and when his son and mother wanted to join him, they were denied visas for five years. (Practically the first thing we see in the video is Marker's footage of Larissa tearfully greeting the two at the airport.) Charting Marker's continuing disillusionment with Soviet communism, the implicit subject of *The Last Bolshevik*, this companion piece also evokes what might be described as his philosophical wanderlust in other respects—as evidenced, for example, by his passing gibe at "Catholics terrified by nature and body."

Attempting to explain an artist's life through his work and vice versa is perilous, yet Marker has adopted this method throughout *One Day in the Life of Andre Arsenevich*. I think he gets away with it because his essayistic manner demonstrates that his acquaintance with both Tarkovsky and his films is sufficiently deep to trace the connections without making too much of them. The only possible exception is when he cuts between the title character of *Stalker* in bed, describing his despair about humanity, and Tarkovsky in his own sickbed, though it's hard to dismiss the autobiographical undertones of the Stalker's monologue.

More generally, Marker is content to leave ambiguities hanging. But how he leaves them hanging is of utmost importance—and is the source of his greatness as a writer and video artist. He wittily recounts a séance Tarkovsky once attended at which Boris Pasternak allegedly informed him, correctly, that he would make only seven films—"but good ones." (Jacques Tati made only six, all good as well.) Even more ambiguously, Marker points out that the first scene of Tarkovsky's first film shows a child standing by a young tree, whereas the last scene of his last film shows a child lying at the foot of a dead tree. This implies that Tarkovsky had a remarkable singularity of purpose—Marker adds that when Tarkovsky shot the later scene he didn't even know he was ill—but the viewer is left to decide what it means.

Marker isn't just interested in such symmetries; he's equally concerned with bits of whimsy, such as Tarkovsky adapting Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers" in one of his early student films—occasioning some interesting rhymes with Robert Siodmak's 1947 noir version—and Tarkovsky's cameo appearance in the same

film, whistling "Lullaby of Birdland." Lives are made up of relevancies and irrelevancies alike, and Marker has the good sense to be attentive to both.

At one point he takes off from the premise that the house in *The Sacrifice* is a character, noting that in other films Tarkovsky was building an "imaginary" and "unique" house "where all the rooms open into one another and all lead to the same corridor. Opening a door by chance, the actors of *The Mirror* could cross paths with those from *Nostalghia*." This eventually drifts into a discussion of the literal houses Tarkovsky lived in, but I think Marker is alluding mainly to the house he himself is building—a kind of meeting place for Tarkovsky's various films that also contains several passageways between life and work. It's the kind of utopian space that has particular resonance in the work of Marker, so it seems only fitting that he should find parts of the cumulative wisdom of his own life reflected in the ecstatic visions of his Russian friend.

—*Chicago Reader*, September 15, 2000

Riddles of a Sphinx

From the Journals of Jean Seberg

Reviewing *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* three years ago, I assigned all of the movie's writing credits to writer-director Mark Rappaport, while including Rock Hudson himself, in addition to Eric Farr (the actor hired to represent Hudson discussing his own life), as a cast member. In the case of writing credits, I reasoned that even if *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* used some of Hudson's own statements made in interviews, as well as movie dialogue (which was written by others) from numerous clips, it was Rappaport's editing choices as well as his own text that determined the final meaning of the material. At the same time, because we saw so much of Hudson as well as Farr in this film I felt it "starred" both of them, though Hudson made no decision to appear in it.

The same reasoning applies to Rappaport's *From the Journals of Jean Seberg*, an even richer work. It's composed of the same sort of basic materials as its predecessor—an actor (Mary Beth Hurt) who plays Seberg and is seen almost always in juxtaposition with the real Seberg, commenting on Seberg's life while we look at clips from her features. (The commentary periodically moves beyond Seberg to take in the lives and careers of Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave, two contemporaries who, like Seberg, have been associated with radical politics.) In spite of certain methodological and stylistic similarities between *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1992) and *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* (1995), the new movie is by no means a spin-off, but a substantially different work with a mood and feeling all its own. A new kind of movie, and a highly entertaining one, it has created more of a buzz at festival screenings than anything else Rappaport has done in three decades of independent work (in a career now encompassing eight features and a dozen shorter works)—a response few would have predicted given the relative obscurity of its subject.

Many critics are referring to this movie as a documentary, a label I strenuously object to. However unorthodox the terms "fictional biography" and "fictional essay" appear, they come much closer to describing what Rappaport is up to. To call *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* a documentary is to imply that Seberg herself is speaking to us through it—a conclusion one can reach only if one subscribes to the pseudoknowledge proffered by pop journalism about movie stars. (For the record, Rappaport's principal source, apart from films, is a single

book, David Richards's 1981 *Played Out: The Jean Seberg Story*—the only Seberg biography, written by someone who never met her.)

A suicide at forty, Seberg was hounded to death in 1979 by the FBI because of her work with the Black Panthers. When she became pregnant, J. Edgar Hoover planted a fallacious story in *Newsweek* that the father was black. The baby died, and many nervous breakdowns and suicide attempts followed. Part of what made Seberg's life and career so heartbreaking was that her early fame as a teenager seemed to carry so much promise. Her well-publicized debut in Otto Preminger's *Saint Joan*—after a nationwide talent search that screened thousands of applicants before she was discovered in small-town Iowa—was followed by her fresh-faced roles in *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958) and *Breathless* (1959), which catapulted her to icon status, her close-cropped hair becoming a central fashion reference. She also acted in films by Philippe de Broca and Claude Chabrol but got her only chance to do something interesting in an American picture called *Lilith* (1964); after that she was repeatedly wasted in mediocre French movies (four of them directed by her first three husbands) and Hollywood efforts like *Paint Your Wagon* and *Airport*, where she was usually miscast.

In *Rock Hudson's Home Movies*—which was speculative but less obviously so—one could feel that Rappaport was adopting the convention of speaking for Hudson in order to speak about him. But in this film he is speaking for Seberg in order to say many things about many subjects. Seberg the biological individual is only one of these subjects, and only in a limited and somewhat problematic fashion. On the other hand, "Jean Seberg" as what certain academics would call a text or a textual trace—a cluster of signs and assigned meanings that most viewers have "read" as if they composed a biological individual, not a set of media signals—is very much the focus of this film. And learning to distinguish the real Seberg from the textual Seberg is one of the more valuable lessons this movie offers.

One comes away from this film with a tragic sense that the real Seberg is not only unknown but unknowable, much as her textual counterpart often was. Perhaps her relation to the camera had something to do with this, as one of Rappaport's fictional monologues obliquely suggests: "I was the first actress who returned the hard stare of the camera lens—and, at the same time, [was] aware that the camera was looking at me. In that sense, even if you didn't hear of me, I became the first modern movie star."

In the interests of full disclosure, I should mention two facts. One is that Rappaport is a good friend of mine and that we have argued at length about Jean Seberg before, during, and since the completion of this project. The other is that in Paris on the afternoon of March 17, 1973, I met Jean Seberg at her apartment on rue de Bac.

Not that it was an especially momentous meeting. A friend of mine who was a

friend of Seberg's had hired me to adapt a J. G. Ballard novel, *The Crystal World*, for a film treatment—the only scriptwriting I've ever done. After I did about half the work, the pages were shown to Seberg for a second opinion. Seberg had recently tried her hand at screenwriting and was interested in looking at some of the efforts of others. A meeting was called at Seberg's flat. I arrived first and was delighted to discover that Seberg—hobbling about in a plaster cast, having recently broken a leg—liked my treatment just fine (though I suspect it was mediocre at best; I had so little confidence that the film would ever be made that I didn't even bother to make a copy of the treatment for myself). The upshot was that I was hired to complete the treatment. I still knew that the film would probably never be made, but from that point on I mentally cast Seberg as my heroine. During my visit to her apartment, I also met Seberg's husband at the time, Dennis Berry (son of the blacklisted Hollywood director John Berry), as well as her former husband Romain Gary, who lived in the adjoining flat and happened to drop by.

The only other time I ever saw Seberg in the flesh was in late 1974, and then only from a distance. I was present at what may have been the world premiere of a short film she wrote, directed, and starred in, *Ballad for the Kid*, at the London Film Festival. Its text was highly indebted (though not credited) to Michael McClure's play *The Beard*, and Seberg, who was present to introduce the film, played a character based on Jean Harlow interacting with a character based on Billy the Kid (played by a relative unknown, a young French actor) in an abandoned sandpit somewhere near Orly airport. It was a French hippie "underground" effort that resembled many others of that period, and though it was embarrassingly bad, the derision of the audience seemed needlessly cruel and vindictive. I remember thinking how painful it must have been for Seberg.

So much for my personal encounters with the biological Jean Seberg. I can't say with any honesty that I knew her, but my limited acquaintance at least gave me some sense of who she wasn't—specifically the witty, ironic, and analytical persona created by Rappaport and Hurt. But then again, in order for this film to say what it has to say and do what it wants to do, the biological Seberg becomes almost irrelevant; it's the textual Seberg that ultimately counts. (Rappaport comes closest to acknowledging this when he has Hurt say, on the subject of Seberg appearing so often in humiliating film parts: "I was always a good girl and did what I was told. . . . Maybe I was not smart, that was it. Or maybe I didn't know how to read scripts. How else to explain why I was so complicitous in my own degradation?" The other possible or partial explanation he leaves out—self-hatred—apparently doesn't jibe well enough with the persona he creates.)

Indeed, the curious achievement of *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* as art is that it makes the correctness of Rappaport's positions about various matters—such

as the value of Preminger's *Saint Joan* and Preminger's decision to cast Seberg in it and the easy "casting" of Romain Gary as a crass abuser and exploiter of his wife—only tangential to the film's validity and success. For me, Seberg made a more effective and plausible Joan of Arc than 1957 reviewers were (or Rappaport is) prepared to recognize, and the bald assumption that Gary victimized Seberg (which implies that this was a one-way process) is a judgment that neither Rappaport nor I have the right to make on the basis of the limited information we have. But there are plenty of good aesthetic reasons for Rappaport asking (via Hurt) of Seberg's Joan, "Who on earth would follow this drum majorette into battle?" and depicting all of Seberg's directors and husbands as simple exploiters of her. And in fact, the textual evidence that Gary victimized her in his two features as a writer-director is irrefutable. (So is the evidence of what Roger Vadim and Tony Richardson did on occasion to show off their wives and mistresses on-screen, including Brigitte Bardot and Jane Fonda in several Vadim films and Jeanne Moreau in Richardson's *Mademoiselle*, which leads to the following query: "What is it with these guys, who offer their wives as fodder for the sexual fantasies of millions of unseen men in darkened theaters? How many movies are there in which an actress directed by her husband plays a whore, a hooker, a prostitute, for the amusement of anyone with the price of a ticket?")

Insofar as truth is seldom simple, I would even argue that the aesthetic rightness of Rappaport's decisions in these matters leads to another kind of truthfulness that shouldn't be dismissed. For the fact remains, despite all the cant that tries to persuade us otherwise, that ethical positions in this kind of filmmaking don't exist independently from aesthetic positions. Rappaport has to construct a fictional Seberg in order to say truthful things about the life and image of the real one, and the beauty of the one he creates here is that, with Hurt's poise and eloquence, she exists just long enough to make a few points and then vanishes—leaving behind only traces of the real and unknowable Seberg to confound us all over again.

There is a difference, however, between exploiting a biological individual and juggling a text, and for this reason I can't go along with those reviewers who claim that Rappaport is guilty of manipulating Seberg in the same way that her directors and/or husbands did. In point of fact, the textual discoveries and manipulations in this movie are largely what's so breathtaking about it. A masterful essayist in developing his arguments, Rappaport manages to justify every apparent digression with a remarkable set of continuities and coincidences. A considerable part of his emphasis throughout is on the ambiguity of Seberg's blank expressions—a subject he eventually links to Clint Eastwood's macho persona as the Man with No Name and Dirty Harry, commenting on the separate values this culture assigns to blank expressions in women and in men at the same time that he alludes to Seberg and Eastwood's affair when they were costarring in *Paint Your*

Wagon. Seberg's ambiguity eventually leads to the mythical allure of the madwoman in her most ambitious performance (*Lilith*), whereas Eastwood's ambiguity, combined with his famous terse one-liners, is traced through the presidential posturings of Reagan and Bush ("Read my lips" constituting merely the logical outgrowth of "Make my day").

Following other aspects of the blank expression leads to a detailed discussion of the close-up and the famous experiment in editing conducted in 1923 by Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov, when the same "neutral" close-up of actor Ivan Mozhukhin was juxtaposed with, in turn, a bowl of soup, a dead woman lying in a coffin, and a little girl playing, leading audiences to assign a different emotion to Mozhukhin's "performance" in each case. Before Rappaport restages this experiment a couple of times, with Seberg and Eastwood replacing Mozhukhin (taking his shots of the dead woman and the little girl from Carl Dreyer's *Ordet* and Fritz Lang's *M*, respectively), he informs us that Mozhukhin, after emigrating from Russia to France, was the father of the illegitimate Romain Gary, which leads to yet another string of speculative digressions.

A resourceful film critic as well as an acute social historian, Rappaport is alert to the less-than-obvious continuities between Jane Fonda in *Barbarella* and in her own workout tape many years later, and he's no less adroit in summarizing the two basic kinds of American plays that were popular in the 50s—sex melodramas about "sexual repression and hysteria among the proles" and frothy sex comedies, usually set among the successful and the well-to-do. (In her Marshalltown, Iowa, high school, before she was discovered by Preminger, Seberg starred in at least one outstanding example of each type—*Picnic* and *Sabrina.*) Comparing the varying degrees of protection enjoyed by Fonda, Redgrave, and Seberg when they became radical activists—because of their family backgrounds and their reputations—Rappaport is no less attentive to the overall shapes and developments of their respective careers. (Fonda, he is alarmed to note, eventually apologized for her antiwar protests—though she's apparently never bothered to apologize for playing a bimbo in *Barbarella.*)

What fascinates Rappaport about Seberg's bumpy career are those aspects that sexual ideology prevented us from seeing with any clarity in the 60s and early 70s, before feminism became a household term and a working discourse. "You can't object to something unless there is a vocabulary that can describe the situation you're in," Hurt notes at one point. Despite this fact, after Godard cast Seberg in his first feature—as the American girlfriend of the crook, played by Jean-Paul Belmondo, who ultimately betrays Belmondo to the police, which leads directly to his death—she refused to follow Godard's instructions and filch the crook's wallet while he lay dying. (As Rappaport points out, spectators at the time typically regarded her character as a nihilist and a bitch—check out Pauline Kael's

original review—while the cop-killing hero was considered a charmer.) Similarly, Seberg's sphinxlike attributes in subsequent roles tended to make her a veritable symbol for "mysterious" femininity. She was an object of fearful speculation who was mythologized more often than humanized, probed, or understood.

Indeed, the feminist revisionism that lies at the heart of *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* is ultimately a consideration of the audience rather than an actor—a consideration of what the audience was prepared and unprepared to see between the mid-50s and the mid-70s. Much as *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* uses the gay subtexts of Rock Hudson's Hollywood movies as a route into a discussion of various denials of mainstream America over roughly the same period, this multifaceted follow-up, exploring the fear of the feminine in European as well as Hollywood movies, proposes another tragic, iconic mirror for our collective sexual panic. The fact that Hudson hid his sexuality from the public was an easy enough premise to build a movie around. The fact that Seberg's own sexuality was employed to hide other things—in herself as well as in others—is a much more daunting proposition, leading in several directions at once. What those other things are is a subject this movie opens up but refuses to close down. For all his dogmatic opinions, Rappaport lays a lot of provocative evidence on the table, and we can't help but make our own contributions to the subject.

—*Chicago Reader*, January 12, 1996

International Harvest

National Film Histories on Video

To celebrate the "100th anniversary of cinema," the British Film Institute has commissioned a series of documentaries about national cinemas. Some of them are still being made, but the nine I want to discuss here, all of which have been completed over the past three years, are a highly uneven batch. For starters, the series is based on the debatable premise that the best way to recount the history of movies is by starting with national cinemas, an approach that fosters insularity, mishandles many major figures who are transnational or multinational (including Akerman, Antonioni, Chaplin, Davies, Dreyer, Godard, Hitchcock, Lang, Murnau, Ruiz, Snow, Stroheim, and Welles), and often honors sociology over aesthetics and the typical over the exceptional. Of course, most film professors love this approach, because—to paraphrase critic Bill Krohn writing in another context—it allows one institution (academia) to pay homage to another (national bureaucracy) over the body of an artist. So it's no surprise that an academic and BFI bureaucrat, Colin McCabe, is the principal architect of this package.

Significantly, the late Henri Langlois—the Turkish-born founder of the French Cinémathèque who was arguably the key guru of the French New Wave—spent his life railing against state bureaucracies, and his passion fomented a cinephilia that trampled national boundaries with giddy abandon in the 60s and 70s, much as another brand of cinephilia had in the 20s and 30s. But in more conservative eras such as the present, foreign filmmakers have to be exhibited like zoo animals in their native habitats to be delivered to an international audience. This is part of the bias that underlies the BFI's present agenda, which also often hands over the responsibilities of film history to filmmakers rather than to scholars who've had more opportunities to educate themselves on the subject.

The casualties of this approach include the BFI production that tries to cope with its own national turf, *Typically British* (1994). Over the opening titles cowriter and codirector Stephen Frears proclaims, "The great French film director François Truffaut once famously said that there was a certain incompatibility between the terms 'cinema' and 'Britain.' [Pause.] Well [pause] bollocks to Truffaut." To Frears's credit, he wears his upper-class background on his sleeve in the autobiography that follows, and the sheer disdain conveyed in his pauses ex-

presses almost as much as his words do. But most of what follows constitutes a weary confirmation of Truffaut's bias; Frears is so plainly bored by his subject that he can conclude 50-odd minutes later, "The only truth I have learned is that people when they go to the movies like to see American films." He can't even imagine why they shouldn't—or why this bias may say more about the power of Yankee advertising dollars than about Hollywood aesthetics.

Given such a crass sociological survey of English movies, where the bottom line generally seems like the only game in town, it's hardly surprising to see Frears reject the whole silent era as inconsequential. He patronizes Michael Powell and Humphrey Jennings (accorded one measly clip each); fails to mention Joseph Losey, Cy Endfield, or Richard Lester (presumably regarding all three as American interlopers); reduces Ken Russell and Mike Leigh to the worst single clips imaginable (and has nothing to say about the TV work of either); limits John Boorman, Bill Douglas, Terry Gilliam, Peter Greenaway, Isaac Julien, and Sally Potter to one fleeting movie poster apiece; and, apart from a disparaging nod to *Night Mail*, omits virtually the entire English documentary movement, along with the cycle of Hammer horror movies—meanwhile paying abject obeisance to the Academy Awards and every crumb they've offered British cinema (special points to *Chariots of Fire*, *Gandhi*, and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*). It's frustrating to imagine what a real critic of English cinema like Raymond Durgnat might have done with what Frears chooses to discuss, not to mention what he leaves out.

It may be unfair to saddle Frears with all the inadequacies of this breezy tour, for all its personal elements, because a cowriter (critic Charles Barr) and codirector (Mike Dibb) are also credited; apparently Frears was too busy directing *Mary Reilly* at the time to do much more than chew the fat with a few colleagues (Gavin Lambert, Alexander Mackendrick, Michael Apted, Alan Parker) and add a few pithy voiceovers. Still, I think I'm fully entitled to conclude, bollocks to Frears.

Equally dubious is *The Russian Idea* (1994), directed by Sergei Selyanov from a script by Oleg Kovalov (*Garden of Scorpions*), which ignores all recent scholarship and constructs crackpot theories as a substitute. Postcommunist only in the most vulgar and crudely anticommunist manner, the narration informs us that communism didn't believe in individuality and then contrives to "prove" this by cutting between sequences by Dovzhenko and Eisenstein while identifying neither. (With few exceptions, the clips are identified only in the final credits.) Among the scandalous gaps are any mention of prerevolutionary Russian cinema or the work of Lev Kuleshov. Only slightly better is Edgar Reitz's *Germany: Night of the Filmmakers* (1994), a hastily composed history that uses morphing to plant most of the famous living German directors, from Leni Riefenstahl to Wim

Wenders, in an audience in the Munich Film Archives' auditorium. It's symptomatic that all the clips from silent pictures are partially blocked by the silhouette of the piano that provides the musical accompaniment.

I had higher hopes for Nagisa Oshima's *One Hundred Years of Japanese Cinema* (1995) that were only partially met. Apart from Akira Kurosawa, Oshima is plainly the greatest living Japanese filmmaker, but since he despises the work of virtually all other Japanese directors, he seems quite unsuited to this assignment. Basically turning himself into an academician, he offers us a pocket social history of twentieth-century Japan in relation to film, in which aesthetic issues play almost no role at all. (At the end he speculates that over the next century Japanese cinema will cease to be Japanese and "will blossom as pure cinema," something he clearly would like to see happen.)

Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu, and Kurosawa are accorded only one clip apiece; but Oshima grants himself four clips and manages to discuss or mention most of his other features as well. He even foregrounds his self-interest by shifting from third person to first person in his commentary on the 50s through the 80s—an honest approach, though one that plays havoc with most of the other filmmakers. (He's scarcely convincing when he calls his third-person commentary "objective.") The real problem here is that the story of Japanese cinema can't be recounted by a single voice. Oshima's treatment of contemporary Japanese history sounds audacious and radical in relation to Japanese norms—he's withering about state militarism and attentive toward Korean residents in Japan—but the sociopolitical slant and aesthetic indifference crowds out so much of his subject that this survey can be recommended only as an annex to other materials.

The same caveat applies to one of the best documentaries in the series, Stanley Kwan's 80-minute *Yang + Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema*, an examination of films from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China from the point of view of gender and explicitly from the highly personal and autobiographical vantage point of an openly gay director. But here, at least, Kwan had already done part of the supplementary spadework himself—above all, in his masterpiece, *Actress*, which tackles the silent Chinese cinema in an exciting mix of documentary and fiction about the career of Shanghai actress Ruan Lingyu. And the fact that Chinese film history still remains relatively uncharted gives Kwan the status of a pioneer—a status shared by Oshima more when he contributes to Japanese film than when he expounds on the subject.

It's worth emphasizing that Kwan neglects many major areas of his subject even within the restricted terrain he's chosen—most flagrantly woman directors such as mainlander Li Shaohong and Hong Kong filmmaker Clara Law (though he does give extended space to Hong Kong actress Brigitte Lin and Taiwanese critic Peggy Chiao, who coscripted *Actress*, and he examines at length his own

focus as a director of films about women), not to mention figures as important as Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou, Yim Ho, and Wayne Wang. But this still offers a description of a wide-ranging film history and the changes in culture that inform that history—a task at which Oshima only halfheartedly makes a few stabs. In the process he bears intelligent witness not only to current changes in sexual sensibility and family values taking place across the Chinese-speaking world but also to recent filmmaking that reflects these changes.

Stig Björkman's *I Am Curious, Film*, titled after Vilgot Sjöman's *I Am Curious, Yellow* and *I Am Curious, Blue*, features the lead actress of both, Lena Nyman, as she moves from Sweden to Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Finland to speak to a few filmmakers, cinematographers, and actors.

Apart from Godard's film (see below), this is the only documentary reviewed here that was made by a film critic, which gives it an attentiveness to film history and form missing from most of the other works. Beginning (after the opening sequence from *Persona*) and ending with a consideration of the close-up, this survey can be recommended most of all for its ravishing clips and for its willingness to move beyond Scandinavian reference points—citing such figures as Pasolini, Flaherty, Tarkovsky, and Samuel Fuller—to make critical points.

Predictably, Lars von Trier is assigned the task of explicating Carl Dreyer, and though his comments are annoyingly brief, some beautiful clips from *Vampyr* and *Gertrud* are included. Bergman is treated in depth, though he was apparently unwilling to be interviewed; Sven Nykvist, Liv Ullmann, and Erland Josephson are introduced to take up the slack. Other prominent participants include Fridrik Tor Fridriksson (Iceland) and Aki Kaurismaki (Finland), both speaking English, and pioneers Astrid Henning-Jensen and Stefan Jarl.

Sam Neill's personal and quirky 52-minute essay film about New Zealand, *Cinema of Unease*, really scores, in part because one feels that his subject approaches the attainable, whereas Nelson Pereira dos Santos's far more ambitious *Cinema of Tears*—which tries to take in all of Latin American cinema and has the novel idea of trying to chart its film history through a contemporary melodrama—bites off far more than it can adequately chew.

To be sure, the same problems come up in Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard's 52-minute 2 × 50 *Years of French Cinema* and even in the excellent 225-minute *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies;* but here, at least, as in Kwan's film, the sense of incompleteness is factored in more satisfyingly as a kind of structuring absence. Miéville and Godard, for starters, offer a multifaceted polemic that questions most of the central premises of the "Century of Cinema" series—though not, interestingly enough, the nationalistic orientation (despite the fact that the video's final image is a photograph of Henri Langlois). Paradoxically, it also fulfills the BFI's commission (Miéville and God-

ard's contract pointedly appears under the BFI logo) by offering a comprehensive look at French cinema, though it's broken up into haunted, lyrical, and mainly obscure fragments—mostly unattributed clips, stills, photographs, and names—and patches of music and dialogue that point to a cinema and history that are basically forgotten.

Just how comprehensive this portrait is may not be apparent on a first viewing. It was only during my third time through the video that I began to see the organizing logic and respond fully to the musical flow and visual poetry. In the French magazine *Trafic* Jean-Claude Biette aptly employed Manny Farber's critical categories by calling Godard's recent film *JLG/JLG* "white elephant art" (that is, grandiloquent and self-important) and *2 × 50 Years* "termite art" (unpretentious and concerned only with its own boundaries). It's worth adding that here the obscurity of many of the references—which, along with the unpretentiousness, tends to be more evident in the Godard works cosigned by Miéville—is pivotal to the work's meaning. (A typical obscure reference is to Lucien Coedel, a bit player of the 40s, whose daughter makes a guest appearance in one scene.)

In an unidentified European lakeside hotel, actor Michel Piccoli—recently appointed president of France's First Century of the Cinema Association, based in Lyons at the site of the Lumière factory—arrives to greet Godard shortly after the Lumière Institute's own "century of cinema" celebration in 1995. Godard's skeptical remarks to Piccoli about this celebration circle around three basic points: (1) "Why celebrate cinema? Isn't it famous enough already?" (2) What's being celebrated is the commercial exhibition of cinema rather than its invention or production, which is why projectors are highlighted in the publicity rather than cameras; (3) How can we celebrate a history that isn't even remembered? Godard also adds, "The French cinema is the only one that had critics. In the other countries it became a business right away." These are the themes that the remainder of the video develops.

At Godard's invitation, Piccoli spends the night at the hotel—periodically quizzing the staff to see what they know or remember about French cinema, periodically phoning Lyons and reading from books Godard has given him. Through all this, we get not only a panoply of names and film titles but unidentified and unattributed fragments, many of them certain to be unfamiliar or barely recognized by the audience—following a poetics of amnesia that has already informed Godard's *King Lear*, *Passion*, *Nouvelle vague*, and his still ongoing *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.

A filmmaker who started out as a film critic, Godard regards video as a medium for criticism, and *2 × 50 Years* ends with a moving tribute to French film criticism—stretching that term broadly enough to include precursors as well as poets, art critics, and filmmaker-theorists—by furnishing us with a honor roll of

fifteen individuals, from Denis Diderot to Serge Daney, each of whom is accorded a portrait, a page of text, and an offscreen recitation of a brief passage read by Miéville or Godard. A sixteenth member of this honor roll, Charles Baudelaire, is cited during Piccoli's haunted vigil in his hotel room, and a seventeenth, Roger Leenhardt, is heard at some length and briefly seen in what is probably the video's longest clip. Leenhardt was a critic and filmmaker of real distinction, though he's as forgotten today in France as he is unknown in the States; the clip, unidentified like all the others, comes from Godard's 1965 feature *A Married Woman*. Leenhardt talks about intelligence and some of its social functions, making observations that apply to all of the writers cited in the closing sequence, including Elie Faure, André Malraux, Jean Cocteau, Robert Bresson, Jacques Rivette, and Marguerite Duras.

Clearly the best film histories come from individuals rather than from institutions, and it is only insofar as the BFI's institutional apparatus allows some historians to function as individuals that its "Century of Cinema" series begins to justify itself. Bearing in mind that Godard-Miéville, Oshima, Scorsese, and even Frears function at times as institutions as much as individuals, the distinction is less clear-cut than it might initially seem. Paradoxically, a passionate iconoclast like Langlois might have run circles around all these spokespeople if he'd had a chance to tackle their unruly topics.

—*Cineaste* 23, no. 2 (1997)

International Sampler

Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai

Jim Jarmusch's seventh narrative feature, *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, may be a failure, if only because most of its characters are never developed far enough beyond their mythic profiles to live independently of them. But if it is, it's such an exciting, prescient, moving, and noble failure that I wouldn't care to swap it for even three or four modest successes.

Compared with a masterpiece like its controversial predecessor, the 1995 *Dead Man*, *Ghost Dog* seems designed to get Jarmusch out of the art-house ghetto, at least in this country, and into something closer to the mainstream. It's full of familiar elements reconfigured in unfamiliar ways: Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker), whose life was once saved by Louie, a New Jersey hoodlum, becomes Louie's samurai hit man, communicating with him exclusively via homing pigeons. When something goes wrong during a hit, Louie's gang decides to wipe out Ghost Dog, who retaliates in order to defend himself.

Like *Dead Man*, *Ghost Dog* is far more ambitious than any of Jarmusch's earlier works. Both films still bear traces of his origins as a New York minimalist, but Jarmusch has introduced historical references—a sense of antiquity and tradition treated with genuine gravity and an expanded sense of time to match his well-developed sense of geographical space—that have opened up his imagination and extended his thematic and affective range well beyond that of his first five features.

Some of this sense of history comes through literary references. There were brief references in some of the earlier films, such as those to Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales* in *Mystery Train*, but the references in *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* are crucial. The key texts in *Ghost Dog* are Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai* (an eighteenth-century warrior text), Ryunosuke Akutagawa's *Rashomon and Other Stories* (an early-twentieth-century collection), Mary Shelley's nineteenth-century *Frankenstein*, and an undated French book about bears. These books are as important as the quotations from William Blake's poetry in *Dead Man*, because they offer various kinds of life lessons and because, in one way or another, they're shared by two or more characters and thus become touchstones. Moreover, with the exception of the Akutagawa collection, which circulates the most, all of them can be regarded as books about the movie's title

hero. Indeed, *Hagakure* serves as Ghost Dog's Bible and is quoted in the film in extended intertitles no less than thirteen times; the first twelve passages are read aloud by Ghost Dog, who's offscreen, and the final passage is read aloud by Pearline, a little girl he meets in a park.

Some viewers have been irritated by all these quotations, and there's no question that each of them stops the story dead in its tracks—paradoxically, at the same time it offers interpretive commentary on what's going on. The quotes remind me of a rather obscure fantasy tale of the 40s by Lewis Padgett (the most frequent pen name of Henry Kuttner), "Compliments of the Author," which is about a magical fifty-page book that offers all-purpose instructions to the owner on each page about how to resolve various dilemmas—"Werewolves can't climb oak trees," "He's bluffing," "Try the windshield," "Deny everything," "Aim at his eye"; the relevant page number appears magically on the cover each time it's needed, a total of ten times per owner. (Needless to say, the fiftieth page and last directive is "The End," which echoes the last quotation from *Hagakure* in *Ghost Dog*: "The end is important in all things.") The thirteen quotations from *Hagakure* offered over the course of *Ghost Dog* suggest a similar metaphysical conceit—meeting a desire for discipline and purity, a need to reduce uncertainty by limiting all understanding to a single book outlining a single way of life.

Forming a dialectic with this volume is the Akutagawa collection, the opening story of which, "In a Grove," consists of multiple contradictory accounts of the same incident from the viewpoints of separate characters. (This story forms the basis of Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*; confusingly, the second story, "Rashomon," furnished the basis of Kurosawa's sentimental framing device for the same film. The radical moral of "In the Grove" appears to be that all the versions of the same story are true; the reductive moral of Kurosawa's framing story is that everyone lies.) Roughly speaking, *Hagakure* corresponds to Jarmusch's background as a minimalist, and "In the Grove"—which suggests a multiple understanding of reality, something closer to cubism—introduces the more skeptical perspectives raised by historical speculation. (Jarmusch's movie stresses that the favorite story of both Pearline and Ghost Dog is "In the Grove," not "Rashomon.")

In *Ghost Dog* the formal equivalent of this vision of multiplicity is a technique used in varying forms throughout the film: the lap dissolve, the means by which two or more separate images gradually overlap. Jarmusch, who's never used lap dissolves this much before, uses them here in two distinct ways: to combine different subjects within the same shot (such as a slow pan across a city street at night and a fixed close-up of Ghost Dog) or to break up an action or moment into several instants (such as several different angles on a parked car that Ghost Dog's approaching, or several successive stages in his progress as he walks down the street). Both procedures, carried out with real distinction in Robby Müller's

glowing cinematography, correspond with some of the sampling techniques used by disc jockeys, and at times they also correspond to some of the other cultural mixtures Jarmusch is playing with. (By contrast, one lovely extended take, which shows Ghost Dog stealing a red convertible at night while its owner steps inside a liquor store, rivals the simplicity and purity of *Hagakure*.) The overall process of mixing and matching evokes Jarmusch's background as a musician and is reflected in RZA's effective score.

From the start of his career Jarmusch has been a settler in the still barely discovered territory of global culture. He's not simply or exclusively an "American independent" but an astute connoisseur of cultural essentials that escape boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, language, gender, and age, and he's broaching a realm of experience and potential bonding that's daily becoming more important to the quality of everyday life on the planet. If nothing else, wherever we happen to be living and whatever language we speak, most of us are affected by the propaganda and manufactured upheavals of the same multicorporate conglomerates—which arguably makes the whole world kin more than communism or democracy ever did.

Viewers still stuck in the limiting paradigm of national identity—according to which Jarmusch is American first and last, Abbas Kiarostami Iranian first and last, and *Irma Vep* some kind of report about the state of French cinema—probably see the fact that English circles the globe via the Internet as an ethnic or ideological marker rather than as a lingua franca that opens the highway to all sorts of persuasions. Within the elastic anonymity of webspace—only one of several contemporary arenas where nationality seems increasingly outdated—it no longer seems far-fetched that a young black man might reinvent himself as an ancient Japanese warrior (one premise of *Ghost Dog*), that a small-time Italian-American mobster (John Tormey) and a black samurai might be "almost extinct" members of "different ancient tribes" who treat each other with reciprocal respect (another premise), that a black American samurai and a black Haitian ice cream vendor (Isaach de Bankolé) unfamiliar with each other's language can be best friends and communicate without any difficulty (still another), or that a slim paperback of Japanese stories might be passed along with profit from a white mobster's moll (Tricia Vessey) to the black samurai who rubs out her boyfriend to the little black girl on a park bench, who simply likes to read (Camille Winbush), and then might get passed all the way back to the moll again (yet another).

I should add that computers don't figure at all in *Ghost Dog*, a movie whose sense of high tech is basically restricted to cars with fancy CD players, guns with silencers, and animated cartoons on TV, and whose sense of antiquity is inseparable from its feeling for the present cultural moment. The point is that all the movie's characters are casually liberated and even defined by their capacity to

drift between cultures: one of the aging white gangsters (Cliff Gorman) loves rap and chants along with it, and another (Henry Silva) responds to an enigmatic quotation about beheading from *Hagakure* by saying, "It's poetry—the poetry of war."

By the same token, an Iranian artist like Kiarostami might be making a more Western-oriented statement about the turn of the century by centering his latest feature, *The Wind Will Carry Us,* around the death of a hundred-year-old woman. In some of his previous films he has synchronized his final scenes, all in Iranian settings, to the music of Vivaldi or Louis Armstrong, which has led some Iranian viewers to complain that he caters to the West. (His very first short, made thirty years ago, used a jazz version of a Beatles tune along with a piece of American "soul-funk.") Similarly, Olivier Assayas's *Irma Vep* may have more to say about what North America, Hong Kong, and France have in common than about what makes them culturally disparate.

For all the differences between Jarmusch and Kiarostami and Assayas in relation to global culture, all three are astute and easily misunderstood practitioners of DJ-like sampling, with all its possibilities and limitations. One can't simply call global culture "good" or "bad" at this point in history because it mixes together too many potential pluses and minuses—broadening the reach and meaning of traditions and at the same time flattening them, often to the point where one has to redefine them. (The same problem crops up in evaluating the diverse menu offerings of California Pizza Kitchen outlets.)

The functioning of a film or book or piece of music within the global culture can't be equated with its function as a piece of provincial, national, or folk art. Theoretically, *Ghost Dog* might be a retrograde hip-hop exercise, or a fair-to-middling American release, or an excellent example of Euro-American cinema, or a highly advanced contribution to global culture—depending on how one defines its audience. If it's simply a movie addressed to white and black American teenagers—which is apparently how some American critics, none of them teenagers, choose to regard it—it might easily be accused of racial and ethnic simplifications that don't move far beyond cartooning. But if it's a multifunctional, multinational object in which dollops of hip-hop, Japanese and Victorian English literature, movies from all over, and diverse aspects of French-Haitian and Italian-American vernacular are mixed, then it needs to be judged somewhat differently. One has to decide whether its major concerns are characters or cultures, and how one decides depends to some degree on how one distinguishes between the two, even if the existential questions in each case turn out to be similar.

Ghost Dog had successful runs in Japan and France late last year, which might be partially explained by Jarmusch's assurance in mixing and matching what he

takes from the arty genre movies of both countries—in this case from two very stylish and mannerist 1967 features, Seijun Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le samourai*—without ever compromising his own, equally mannerist artistic identity. (I don't know if Jarmusch has ever seen Irving Lerner's minimalist 1958 noir and Zen thriller, *Murder by Contract*, a low-budget Hollywood effort, but it too seems relevant to what *Ghost Dog* is doing.) Jarmusch told me that last fall he made a point of showing *Ghost Dog* to the once-prolific, currently unemployed, seventy-seven-year-old B-film maestro Suzuki, who responded, "I see you've taken some things from me, and when I make my next film, I'm going to take some things from you."[1] In any case, Japanese viewers don't appear to object to Jarmusch's appropriation of Japanese elements—his popularity in Japan now appears to be at its highest ever—so why should anyone object to his equally romantic and fanciful sampling of hip-hop, cartoons, and Italian-American gangster culture?

Jarmusch was juggling references of this sort, along with equally sharp music and literary references, long before anybody had heard of Quentin Tarantino—who has subsequently bypassed Jarmusch as the favorite standard-bearer for American independents, though he neither owns the negatives of his pictures nor has final cut on them, unlike Jarmusch. Generational and promotional styles obviously played some role in this supplanting, and it's fascinating to ponder the degree to which *Ghost Dog* can be read, even obliquely, as Jarmusch's gentlemanly response to Tarantino—a distinct possibility since it's Jarmusch's first movie about hit men, a Tarantino staple.

Though all of Jarmusch's movies display ironic or ambivalent relationships to Hollywood models, *Dead Man* was actively hostile to the most all-American of Hollywood genres, the western, especially its insensitive treatments of Indians. The blunt and dark feelings expressed in that movie about racial violence, capitalism, religious hypocrisy, and frontier madness went so far, even when it was pitched as farce or satire, that a significant portion of the American public recoiled from it. Audiences aren't likely to recoil from *Ghost Dog*, whose relation to hit-man thrillers is relatively respectful, regarding its aging, weary, and overweight gangsters (all beautifully cast) with some affection. (They're behind in rent at the Chinese restaurant they use as a clubhouse, and as silly as they often are, all of them are permitted to die with a certain amount of dignity.) Indeed, the contrasting treatments of violence in the two pictures—generally ugly and graceless in *Dead Man*, most often sleek and graceful in *Ghost Dog*—might seem like a contradiction. When I asked Jarmusch about the discrepancy, he insisted that it could be traced back to the movies' respective heroes: a greenhorn accountant (Johnny Depp) awkwardly forced into the role of killer, and a black youth willingly training and disciplining himself as a samurai in deference to a small-time

Italian-American mobster in New Jersey who once saved his life. (The gag about them communicating with each other almost exclusively by homing pigeon seems to come from neither Japanese nor Italian sources; perhaps it can be traced back to *Irma Vep* territory—the silent French serials of Louis Feuillade.)

Nevertheless, a couple of scenes in *Ghost Dog* provide striking continuities with *Dead Man*. Nobody (Gary Farmer)—one of the leads in *Dead Man* and my favorite character in Jarmusch's oeuvre to date—makes a brief appearance in *Ghost Dog*, uttering his signature line in *Dead Man* ("Stupid fucking white man"). And a scene in which Ghost Dog encounters a couple of bear hunters on the road could have come straight out of the earlier film. (This scene occurs after the Haitian ice cream vendor has compared Ghost Dog to a bear and read aloud from the French book on the subject, and the mindless boast of one of the hunters cinches the connection: "There aren't too many of these big black fuckers left around here, so when you get a good, clear shot at it, you take it.") Considering that Jarmusch's original working title for *Dead Man* was "Ghost Dog," it shouldn't be too surprising that, as different as the two films are, they're still blood relations.

The last of the notes appended to the published version of F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*, written in capital letters, is "action is character"—a slogan that might be regarded as Jarmusch's watchword. More a poet than a prose writer, and more comfortable with the kind of action that comes from character than with the kind that comes from plot, Jarmusch tends to leapfrog over knots in his story lines rather than make any effort to untie them. He doesn't tell us how the three cell mates manage to bust out of prison in *Down by Law* but simply cuts to the trio fleeing, and he's similarly unconcerned with how various bounty hunters and marshals in *Dead Man* follow the tracks of William Blake from the town of Machine to the west coast.

In *Ghost Dog* he's clearly as baffled as we are why Ray Vargo (Henry Silva) and other hoodlums who order Ghost Dog to kill Handsome Frank (Richard Portnow), a mug who's shacking up with Ray's daughter Louise, are so miffed when Louise is present at the hit—they thought she'd already left on a bus—that they insist Ghost Dog be rubbed out as well. A more conventional storyteller might point out that Louise was a material witness who could blab something to the cops about Ghost Dog's identity that might be traced back to his boss or perhaps come up with another throwaway explanation. Clearly bored with such details, Jarmusch makes her equally indifferent to the death of Handsome Frank and to the identity of who shot him, then has her "lend" Ghost Dog the Akutagawa book, which she's just finished reading. So the apparent necessity of the hit man being killed seems predicated on some obscure point of pedantry that's never spelled out, underscoring the sense that most of what gangsters do is pretty absurd anyway.

The movie's fascination with Ghost Dog never gives the character enough of a back story to make us believe in him as something more than a cultural premise—which, for that matter, is just about all that Alain Delon was in Melville's *Le samourai*. Jarmusch daringly uses Whitaker for the most part as a hulking silent presence, going about his business in purposeful and dedicated mime, but whenever the movie requires the character to be something more than a mythic icon, we don't know quite what to make of him. We get two slightly different versions of the flashback showing Ghost Dog's first encounter with Louie, but that doesn't suffice to make this movie a *Rashomon*. And though he and Louie view their final confrontation as a scene from a movie—"This is the final shootout scene"; "Yeah, it is"—this doesn't suffice to make it believable, even in the highly circumscribed terms established by this movie. Nonetheless, the cultural feelings inspired by these two prototypes are stirred, and the tenderness between these and other icons somehow survives the awkward clutter.

—*Chicago Reader*, March 17, 2000

NOTE

1. I'm still trying to figure out whether this promise was carried out in Suzuki's splendidly extravagant and pleasurable *Pistol Opera* (2001)—a belated sequel of sorts to *Branded to Kill*—but the presence of a little girl is certainly suggestive. [2002]

Not the Same Old Song and Dance

The Young Girls of Rochefort

As eccentric as this may sound, Jacques Demy's 1967 *Les demoiselles de Rochefort* is my favorite musical. Yet despite my thirty-year addiction to the two-record sound track, the first time I was able to see the movie subtitled was a couple of weeks ago—helpful, considering my faltering French. It's certainly the odd musical out in terms of both its singularity and its North American reputation—a large-scale tribute to Hollywood musicals shot exclusively in Rochefort in southwest France and an unabashedly romantic paean to American energy and optimism that's quintessentially French. It has a score by Michel Legrand that's easily his best, offering an almost continuous succession of songs with lyrics by Demy, all written in alexandrines (as is a climactic dinner scene that's spoken rather than sung); choreography that ranges from mediocre (Norman Maen's frenchified imitations of Jerome Robbins) to sublime (Gene Kelly's choreography of his own numbers); and perhaps the most beautiful dovetailing of failed and achieved connections apart from Shakespeare and Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, shot during the same period.

When it comes to charting movie genres and traditions, most of this film's virtues fall off the map. Joseph McBride invited me to contribute to his recently published *Book of Movie Lists*, and I opted for a list of the ten best jazz films—neither the best films about jazz nor the best examples of filmed jazz but something more rarefied: movies in which the aesthetics of jazz and the aesthetics of film find some happy, mutually supportive meeting ground. Although I didn't think of it at the time, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* certainly qualifies: from Legrand's improvised piano solos and big-band arrangements to stretches of scat singing and Demy's allusions to Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Lionel Hampton, this movie swings. Even when the choreography is less than it might have been, Demy's sweeping cranes and extended pans and intricate mise en scène cook as infectiously as a first-rate rhythm section.

It's also a musical that periodically defamiliarizes—"makes strange"—the form of the musical. Defying the obsessive symmetry and frontality of Hollywood numbers, dancing extras here move at the periphery of the frame in certain shots. There are two cheerful songs about an ax murder, "The Woman Cut into Pieces," and another just afterward about policing the crowd near the scene of the crime.

And Demy's clear tributes to Hollywood musicals—*On the Town*, *An American in Paris*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*—wind up making the movie seem more French than American.

Most musicals shift back and forth between story (spoken dialogue) and song-and-dance numbers—sometimes creating queasy transitions just before or after these shifts, when we're uncertain where we are stylistically. But *The Young Girls of Rochefort* often daringly places story and musical numbers on the screen simultaneously, mixing them in various ways and in different proportions. One of the stars may be walking down the street, for example, but the pedestrians around her are suddenly dancing, and she slips momentarily in and out of their choreography. This curious mix produces powerful, deeply felt emotions—an exuberance combined with a sublime sense of absurdity, shot through with an almost constant sense of loss, yearning, and even tragedy. Yet the coexistence of this strangeness and this intensity will inevitably make some American viewers laugh in disbelief and regard the whole spectacle as an esoteric piece of camp. (The same problem exists to a lesser extent in two of my favorite American freak musicals, both with Rogers and Hart scores—*Love Me Tonight* and *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum*—which display a related metaphysical impulse to perceive the musical form as a continuous state of delirious being rather than a traditional story with musical eruptions.)

Some American viewers may find it difficult to feel their way into such an aesthetic overload. In France the film was revived regularly even before its 1996 restoration by Demy's widow, Agnès Varda (who has a walk-on as a nun). And in her wonderful documentary about the film, *The Young Girls Turn 25* (1992), we encounter a French teenager with a backpack who proudly and calmly informs us that she carries the CD of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* and the video of *Les demoiselles de Rochefort* everywhere she goes, unwilling to spend even a night without them. Such a degree of passion about art is bound to seem demented in a "utilitarian" (i.e., money-minded) society such as ours, but it's entirely compatible with the degree of passion expressed in the film itself.

Received opinion on musicals is that the genre's greatest achievements—such as the entertaining Astaire-Rogers steamrollers and *Singin' in the Rain*—are triumphs of engineering, coordination, and expertise; it's almost as if we judge this art the way we judge our smart bombs and sporting events. This quantitative aesthetic doesn't allow for the possibility that a musician with limited technique like Thelonious Monk might be a greater pianist than a virtuoso like Oscar Peterson. And unless you conclude that the only reason for "technique" is to express what you want to say, the technical shortcomings of *The Young Girls of Rochefort* are bound to be disappointing. The verdict of critic Gary Carey in the late 70s is characteristic: "Unfortunately Demy, who had been so good at chore-

ographing the movements of ordinary people through his camera, does not know how to photograph the choreography of dancers. (He doesn't have much of an eye as to what is good choreography and what isn't, either.) The film falls to pieces whenever anyone begins to dance, and since someone is always dancing, it ends as a pile of very pretty rubble." Pauline Kael wrote in separate articles that "a movie like *The Young Girls of Rochefort* demonstrates how even a gifted Frenchman who adores American musicals misunderstands their conventions" and "it was obvious from *Rochefort* that [Demy] had—momentarily, I hope—run dry."

Made on the heels of Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, which enjoyed worldwide success, this extravaganza—which had a much bigger budget than *Cherbourg*—might well be considered an attempt to do the impossible if one views it as an imitation of the Hollywood musical rather than an inspired appropriation of some of its elements. It would, of course, be unreasonable to expect a facsimile of the Hollywood musical from a filmmaker with no stage or film-musical experience (apart from *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*) and without the resources of a Hollywood studio or an indigenous tradition. But there's no reason to believe that Demy—a filmmaker with a fully developed style and vision of his own when he made *Les demoiselles de Rochefort*—intended to reproduce something we already have. An English-language version shot simultaneously (now a scarce collectors' item) was a commercial prerequisite for the film getting made, but it was the subtitled version that opened in New York in April 1968. It was so poorly received commercially that Demy's career never fully recovered, and we've had to wait thirty years to see the movie again.

The film unfolds over a single weekend. On Friday morning a team of boat, bicycle, and motorcycle salespeople in trucks and on motorcycles and horses, including Etienne (George Chakiris) and Bill (Grover Dale), arrive in Rochefort by ferry. As they set up their stands and stages in the huge city square for the fair on Sunday afternoon, the camera pans, cranes up, then pans again to the studio where Delphine (Catherine Deneuve) and her twin sister Solange (Françoise Dorléac) are giving a combined music and dance class to kids. We discover that Delphine is a ballet teacher and dancer, Solange a composer and singer, and that both dream of meeting their romantic ideals and moving to Paris. (Deneuve and the late Dorléac—who died in a car accident the same year *Les demoiselles* was released—were real-life sisters but not twins: Dorléac was one year older than Deneuve. This is their only movie together, though both appeared separately in films by François Truffaut and Roman Polanski.)

It turns out that Delphine's ideal man, whom she's never met, is an artist and sailor currently stationed in Rochefort, Maxence (Jacques Perrin): the ideal

woman he's painted, whom he's been searching for across the globe, is a dead ringer for Delphine. His canvas hangs in a local gallery run by Delphine's unsuccessful suitor, Guillaume (Jacques Riberolles). The sisters have a ten-year-old half brother named Boubou; their mother, Yvonne (Danièlle Darrieux), runs the café-restaurant in the city square, which Maxence, Etienne, and Bill all frequent. Unbeknownst to the family, Boubou's father has recently moved back to Rochefort to run a music store; Yvonne had backed out of marrying Simon Dame (Michel Piccoli) years earlier, when she became pregnant with Boubou, because she couldn't face the prospect of being called Madame Dame. Though Simon knew she'd had twins by a former lover, he'd never seen them, so when Solange comes to his shop and they become acquainted, he has no idea that she's one of Yvonne's daughters.

It's love at first sight when Solange encounters an old friend of Simon Dame—famous American composer and concert pianist Andy Miller (Gene Kelly)—while she's collecting Boubou from school. She has no idea this man is Miller, whom she wanted to meet so he could hear her piano concerto. They don't exchange names or addresses, but he has a page from her score, which she inadvertently leaves behind. Meanwhile, when two of the young women in the show planned for the Sunday fair run off with a couple of sailors, Etienne and Bill convince Delphine and Solange to stage a number in their stead, promising them a free ride to Paris afterward . . .

Apart from the ax murder and periodic dark reminders of the nearby soldiers in training, both of which further develop the theme of thwarted desire, these are the basic elements of the plot, and Yvonne's café on the square is the hub of all the complex comings and goings. (Like many of the buildings in *Playtime*, this freestanding structure has huge glass windows, allowing us to see much of the surrounding traffic.) But to summarize these intricate moves, characters who are ideally suited keep missing each other as they go about their daily routines; in most cases they don't even realize that they're occupying the same city. And even though *The Young Girls of Rochefort* is on all counts Demy's most optimistic film—the one in which every character eventually finds the person she or he is looking for—the missed connections preceding this resolution are relentless, and one may still wind up with a feeling of hopeless despair despite the overdetermined happy ending. Indeed, the split second by which Maxence misses Delphine at the café before he's shipped away might well be the most tragic single moment in all Demy's work, perhaps even surpassing the grisly suicide at the end of *Une chambre en ville*. By contrast, when the "ideal couple" do eventually meet

(an event represented only obliquely) in the film's final shot, it's a simple concession to musical-comedy convention, registering only as a sort of offhand diminuendo and postscript; what reverberates more decisively is the sense of dreams just missing realization.

In fact the movie overall leaves one in a unique manic-depressive state, a kind of poetic fugue in which boundless despair and exuberant optimism coexist. This is Demy's vision of life—*Lola* and *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* are suffused with much the same ambiguous mixture—but thanks to Legrand's buoyant score and the size of the canvas, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* conveys it with unparalleled vibrancy and luminosity.

If songs and dances represent fantasy, and everyday activities reality, it can't be said that Demy ever privileges one over the other; he's more concerned with how fantasy and reality interact, or fail to interact. One might say that the missed connections in the film represent reality—the characters are too engrossed by everyday life to see that their ultimate dreams are only a block or so away—and that the eventual successful connections represent fantasy, the dreamlike closure of musical comedy. But in fact Demy is a much subtler dialectician, converting the Cartesian principle of French life and culture—"I think, therefore I am"—into "I dream, and dreaming is a part of life, therefore I live." Furthermore, by staging all his musical numbers in real locations rather than on sets, Demy deliberately mixes his modes, with the result that the missed connections are as much a function of his mise en scène as the chance encounters. A poetic realist as well as a dreamer, Demy confused some audiences and critics throughout his career, much as his mentor Tati did, by keeping a firmer grip on the realities he was filming than many were prepared to see at the time. For viewers trained to regard fantasy as an alternative to reality rather than as part of the reality of consciousness, Demy's mixture is bound to seem jarring—though it may also jar one into perceiving a richer reality than most entertainments acknowledge.

The film's chance encounters and missed connections are expressed not only spatially but musically, in the score and in Demy's delicately crafted lyrics. Maxence's song about his search is reprised as Delphine's song about her own longings; Simon's account of his lost love becomes, with appropriate alterations in the lyrics, Yvonne's own regrets about having abandoned him; Solange's piano concerto takes on lyrics after Andy intercepts the score. Many other reprises are less obvious than these. The song that goes with policing the crowd, for instance, reprises and adds lyrics to a secondary theme from the opening dance number in the city square. Both sequences emphasize community over individual destiny:

here, as elsewhere in the film, Legrand and Demy enrich the meaning of other scenes by playing with the emotional, thematic, and musical effects of rhyme.

Masterpieces normally connote perfection, but it might be argued that some of the imperfections in *The Young Girls of Rochefort* enhance the overall experience by bringing it closer to life, making the actors seem more vulnerable. (Other imperfections, like the product plugs during the climactic fair—another parallel with *Playtime*, given some of its neon signs—are simple reminders of the difficulties of making big-budget French movies.) Darrieux, for instance, is the only cast member who does her own singing, though the dubbing of the others is usually carried out well, with the actors' singing voices carefully matched to their speaking voices (including Kelly's spoken French). More artificial are Delphine's and Solange's performances on trumpet and flute.

Yet given some of Demy's original plans for the movie, it's a miracle it turned out as well as it did. Before he selected Rochefort as his location, he considered making "Les demoiselles d'Avignon," "Les demoiselles d'Hyères," "Les demoiselles de Toulouse," and "Les demoiselles de La Rochelle," among others. Rochefort won out because of the size of its central square, though production designer Bernard Evein found it necessary to repaint forty thousand square meters of the city's facades. (Still, director André Téchiné has cited the movie as one of the best ever made about this part of France.) Even more improbably, Demy originally thought of casting Brigitte Bardot and Geraldine Chaplin as the twin sisters.

Demy also planned to make more extensive references to *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* by casting Nino Castelnuovo, the hero of that film, as Bill. When Castelnuovo proved unavailable, Demy had to change the script. But it's worth pointing out that the offscreen victim of the ax murder is Lola, the title heroine of Demy's first feature, and there are many other allusions to earlier Demy films throughout: According to critic Jean-Pierre Berthomé, the three successive endings of *The Young Girls of Rochefort* replicate the final shots of *Bay of Angels*, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, and *Lola*. And both *Lola* and *The Young Girls of Rochefort* associate Americans with white convertibles.

Given the extraordinary lift Gene Kelly gives the movie, it's hardly surprising that Demy wanted him from the outset, though he had to wait two years before Kelly was free of other commitments. Indeed, Kelly brings to the movie the kind of boundless elation musicals exist to produce, as do Chakiris and Dale, the other two American dancers featured, though to a lesser extent. Indeed, it's the combination of this spirit with the soul of the French cast that gives *The Young Girls of Rochefort* its distinctive flavor. Like the pairing of Jean Seberg with Jean-Paul

Belmondo in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, or the mating of a David Goodis plot with Charles Aznavour's mug in François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*, this combination provides the kind of combustion that powered the French New Wave and the general reinvention of movie energy in the 1960s. Godard and Truffaut may have watered the roots, but it was Demy who produced this relatively late-blooming flower, combining the virtues of the Hollywood musical with French poetic realism to produce these fresh, colorful petals.

—*Chicago Reader*, November 27, 1998

Flaming Creatures and *Scotch Tape*

Though you'd never imagine this from the mainstream press, there are signs that experimental film is on the rise again, as a taste as well as an undertaking—even if it's often returning in mutated forms like video or areas of filmmaking where we least expect to find it. At the Rotterdam Film Festival three weeks ago, hundreds of Dutch viewers, most of them in their twenties, stormed the largest multiplex in Holland—and one of the best designed facilities I know of anywhere, suggesting an unlikely cross between a Borders and a Beaubourg, a mall and an airport—to see work thought to have little or no drawing power in this country. Some of their choices included short experimental videos from Berlin, Providence, and London (at a crowded weekday afternoon program called "City Sounds"); a very charismatic Taiwanese feature, Ko I-cheng's *Blue Moon*, whose five reels can be shown in any order (they all feature the same characters and settings, but whether the five plots match up chronologically or as parallel fictional universes—signifying flashbacks, flash-forwards, or variations on a theme—is left up to the viewer); several videos and the most recent feature of Alexander Sokurov. And in a smaller and older Rotterdam multiplex, comparable crowds were turning up for an Ernie Gehr retrospective, Jon Jost's first video, and experimental documentaries from all over, a few shown with live musical accompaniment. (The festival was also showing pictures like *Deconstructing Harry* and *The Ice Storm*, but for once these weren't overpowering the more experimental fare; if anything, it was the arthouse blockbusters that seemed relatively marginalized at this event.)

Sampling all of the above, I began to think that, speaking very broadly, there are two main trends in experimental work right now, and the chief dividing line between them may be the presence or absence of music. The films and videos with music tend to draw bigger crowds and offer more collective experiences; the works without music, most of them made by older artists, usually have a more one-to-one relationship with each viewer. Another way of describing the difference would be to say that the more popular work starts with what a young media-savvy viewer is already likely to feel at home with—TV, music, a built-in skepticism about both media and political change—and the more difficult work assumes a less well-traveled path, for better and for worse.

Which tradition did Jack Smith (1932–89) belong to? Surely more the first one

than the second, despite the fact that skepticism about political change is not an emotion I would think about ascribing to *Flaming Creatures,* Smith's masterpiece—only to some of its explicators and champions. But it's important to distinguish between traditions of filmmaking and traditions of film viewing. Starting this Thursday, February 26, the Film Center is presenting four separate Jack Smith programs over three consecutive days, and showing *Flaming Creatures* with Ken Jacobs's *Blonde Cobra* all three days. At one time or another, I've seen about five of the seven hours in this retrospective, and to my mind this work is split quite dramatically between films with sound and music on the one hand and silent footage on the other—not because Smith deliberately divvied up his work in that fashion but because the original functions and settings of most of his work no longer exist.

Properly speaking, there are only two surviving integral films by Jack Smith, the 3-minute color *Scotch Tape* (1962) and the 42-minute black-and-white *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Everything else comprises unedited or reedited footage by Smith that he used in his live performances and footage by others recording some of his performances, live and otherwise. (Some of this latter footage has been edited into "finished" works, like *Blonde Cobra,* and some hasn't.) Seven years of research and restoration by J. Hoberman (the series curator) and Jerry Tartaglia preceded this program, and one appreciates all the historical and archival decisions involved. But the fact remains that there's a world of difference between *Flaming Creatures* and the remainder of the program that no amount of good will can fully erase. It's the difference between one of the greatest and most pleasurable avant-garde movies ever made and large heaps of suggestive or not-so-suggestive supplementary material. And roughly speaking, moving between these two extremes means partaking of the two strains in experimental filmmaking described above: "musicals" with a social praxis and more arcane objects for individual study.

Implicitly or explicitly, all avant-garde cinema has a dialectical relationship to mainstream cinema, which usually means Hollywood. *Flaming Creatures* may be the first major avant-garde movie apart from Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1939) that embraces Hollywood at the same time that it more implicitly defies its narrative procedures. In this respect it shares a kinship with the found-footage film using mainstream material—a relatively recent tradition stretching all the way from Craig Baldwin to Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* to a striking Austrian short film I saw in Rotterdam, Martin Arnold's *Alone: Love Wastes Andy Hardy.* Reediting fragments of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland so that they sound like squealing and unsettling geeks, Arnold is clearly subverting his source

and thereby making a "film" rather than a movie.[1] But part of what's so mesmerizing and luscious about *Flaming Creatures* is that it's more interested in emulating various features starring Maria Montez or directed by Josef von Sternberg, at least after a fashion, than it is in subverting them; it's basically an act of love, not one of revenge.

Historically, the impact of *Flaming Creatures* in 1963 had little to do with this love and a great deal to do with its presumed sexual content: flaccid penises, bouncing breasts, evocations of an orgy. The object of repeated police raids, it quickly became a *cause célèbre* for free speech in general and "underground cinema" in particular, especially as these were being defined by critic and programmer Jonas Mekas, the film's most vocal champion at the time. Smith, who saw the movie strictly as a comedy, eventually became so alienated by Mekas's rhetoric and institutional appropriation of it that he never made another film that achieved a final form. Fifteen years later, he was calling Mekas "Uncle Fishhook," and both of his subsequent 16-millimeter features, *Normal Love* and *No President*, remained in a kind of performative limbo—the first never finished, the second an assembly of earlier films that was repeatedly reconfigured. (I've seen both, nearly three decades apart, and if distant memories are reliable, *No President*—or at least the February 1969 version I saw—is by far the more interesting of the two.) According to Tartaglia, Smith was prone to reedit his films even while they were being projected (a practice followed by D. W. Griffith during the initial runs of some of his silent features)—anticipating somewhat the strategy of Ko I-cheng with successive festival screenings of *Blue Moon*, to shift the order of the reels each time. After failing to exercise control over how *Flaming Creatures* was perceived, he restricted himself to controlling the unique shape and direction of each of his performances, which often included footage from other works.

As Susan Sontag aptly wrote in 1964, a few months before her highly influential "Notes on 'Camp'" appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Flaming Creatures* is that rare modern work of art: "it is about joy and innocence." Seen today in a less easily shocked climate, it's clearly so playful that it exudes sweetness and mystery more than a desire to outrage (which it also has). Like all of Smith's work, its basic mode is children's theater, where dressing up in elaborate drag is the principle pleasure, though a few props—particularly a potted plant and a lantern—are treated every bit as lovingly as the cast and costumes. The movie is shot on a variety of faded film stocks, some of the light readings are overexposed, and the resulting textures are so dreamlike that they perform a wondrous kind of alchemy on the action; I can't think of another cinematic object where "bad" photography looks more exquisite. Smith modestly credits himself only for this handheld photography in the movie itself, but there's no question that it's his paintbrush in the painterly splendors that unfold, even when he's jiggling and bouncing the

camera to simulate an earthquake toward the end or, more generally, to express his delirious pleasure in what he's filming.

The idea of brandishing technical imperfection with pride is already present in *Scotch Tape*, accounting in this case for the film's very title. Shot in 1959, the film grew out of one of the many shooting sessions organized for Ken Jacobs's still-unfinished *Star Spangled to Death*, an epic compilation of found footage interspersed with interludes of Smith's clowning. On that particular day of shooting, Jacobs brought Smith and a couple of his costumed associates, Jerry Sims and Reese Haire, to the site of a demolished building on a stretch of Manhattan's west side where the Lincoln Center complex now stands, and Smith borrowed Jacobs's camera to film the others, including Jacobs, dancing among the rusted cables and broken concrete slabs—some of which become more prominent than the people in certain shots—and doing all his editing in-camera. (There's also a pivotal use of an artificial green flower.) Afterward, Smith discovered that a dirty piece of scotch tape that had become stuck in the camera gate wound up getting printed in the upper right corner of every frame, and rather than accept this as an encumbrance, he preferred to celebrate its presence in his title. As P. Adams Sitney points out, the tape's "fixed position offers a formal counterbalance to the play of scales upon which the shot changes are based," so it's a textbook illustration of what Orson Welles was talking about when he once said that a film director is someone who "presides over accidents."

Three years later, on instructions from Smith, future filmmaker Tony Conrad cut a Peter Duchin rhumba to match the *Scotch Tape* footage and significantly described the results as a personal epiphany: "All of a sudden, a commitment emerged, a kind of special pleasure that reached out and grabbed the whole scene in a way that was inhabited by a very very special comic presence. It was on the way to ecstasy; in fact it *was* ecstasy. And at that point, I was won over to be a filmmaker; it was such an extraordinary thing to see, what happened to sound in the presence of a moving image."

Most of *Flaming Creatures* is an elaboration and extension of the ecstasy described by Conrad, this time to the strains of such varied materials as "Amapola" (a 30s rhumba subtitled "Pretty Little Poppy"), a mock radio commercial with hokey music for a "new heart-shaped lipstick [that] shapes your lips as you color them," Yoshiko Yamiguchi performing "China Nights" (the title song of a 1940 Japanese movie), Béla Bartók's "Concerto for Solo Violin," Kitty Wells performing "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels," a 30s Cuban bolero called "Si-

boney," and the Everly Brothers' version of "Be-Bop-a-Lula." And what transpires beneath this musical material is mainly a group grope of cascading and overlapping semicostumed men and women filmed in various kinds of shallow space—sometimes seen from a ladder looking down at the writhing bodies, sometimes seen from closer proximities, often viewed from tilted angles that confound our overall sense of an integral space—and overflowing the various compositions. The narrative continuities may get confused in spots, but the shots themselves are visionary marvels—evocative at times of tableaux in the late films of Sergei Paradjanov, which often suggest densely packed jewel boxes—that are stunning in their generosity.

The ghosts of Hollywood features like *Cobra Woman*, *The Devil Is a Woman*, and *The Shanghai Gesture* hover over the action—not only in its exotic accoutrements and its low-rent dreams of opulence but also in its manner of announcing itself, specifically in its opening and closing titles, which simultaneously mock and celebrate its Hollywood inspirations. The florid title card makes a delayed appearance, and the cast list, which turns up a limp penis or two later, is initially obscured by the silhouettes of a man with a flower and a woman that eventually move away, then emerges as only semilegible when it can finally be seen without encumbrance. Similarly, when "The End" appears in fancy script somewhat before the film's end, between a pair of bare legs, it also hangs on afterward like a dogged prop, another item in the film's crowded agenda of crisscrossing limbs and organs. Like the blonde drag queen who turns up just before, periodically smoking a cigarette while she's being ravished, it's a simple and comic acknowledgment that even the most important elements in a psychosexual scenario often turn out to be mere distractions when other factors supersede them.

Smith's two major critical-theoretical position papers, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez" and the much shorter "Belated Appreciation of V.S." (meaning Von Sternberg), both published in *Film Culture* during the same period, throw a certain amount of light on his sources. (They've recently become available again in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith* [1997], a well-documented collection edited for High Risk Books by Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell.) Both have been read as early camp manifestos before camp taste entered the mainstream, but they are perhaps even more relevant as passionate personal declarations that outline some of the psychic determinations behind Smith's image pool. Sontag's early defense of *Flaming Creatures*, rightly terming it more intersexual than homosexual, mainly referenced it in relation to Pop art and "the poetic cinema of shock" rather than camp, and other commentators have quite rightly noted it as a crucial forerunner of many avant-garde theater productions staged by Robert Wilson (such as *Deafman's Glance*) and Richard Foreman.

All these factors are pertinent to placing this gorgeous eruption in the history of art, but I'm not sure how far they go in explaining why the movie plays so well today, in every sense of the word. I'm not even sure how much Smith's personal biography is relevant: whether he was a paranoid madman, as some people have claimed, or a perfectly lucid anarchist who didn't like the way his comedy was turned into a political and aesthetic banner for others. When I interviewed Mekas in 1982 for a book-length survey about independent and experimental filmmaking, he was adamant about insisting that Smith's work had nothing to do with protest or politics: "Later, once it was shown, it *became* political. But the creation of it did not come from any political necessity."[2]

I disagree with that position as much now as I did then, but I also have to concede that all visionary art tends to have a problematical relationship to politics. For all its boisterous comedy, and in part because of it, *Flaming Creatures*, like all the best utopian art, offers itself as a vision of paradise, but by virtue of its more nonnarrative aspects, it posits paradise as something already attained rather than as a goal that characters strive or might strive to achieve. How to get there isn't really part of Smith's agenda; his achievement as an experimental filmmaker is to take you somewhere you've never been before, and to leave you there for a spell. And his instinct as an entertainer is to orchestrate this paradise with music, creating a common bond of recognition that ever so slightly suggests that such a paradise is within the grasp of everyone.

—*Chicago Reader*, February 20, 1998

NOTES

1. See my extended review, "Wrinkles in Time," *Chicago Reader*, February 18, 2000.

2. *Film: The Front Line 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, 1983), p. 21.

Ruiz Hopping and Buried Treasures

Twelve Selected Global Sites

1. Ruiz's Secret (Iowa City)

On a bet, and with the help of a Rockefeller grant, Raúl Ruiz—born in Puerto Montt, Chile, in 1941—wrote one hundred plays between the ages of seventeen and twenty. Or maybe it was between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one; accounts differ. ("It was very easy," he told one interviewer; "they were not really plays. Some of them were five pages long, others were one hundred pages, but most were very short plays.")

Many years later, after he became a filmmaker, he decided to make one hundred films by the time he was fifty. How close he's come to achieving that aim is debatable, depending on how you keep count: Does a serial or a miniseries count as one film or several? And what about videos? But the latest tally of works includes ninety-odd titles, all of them written or cowritten as well as directed by Ruiz. Anyway, Ruiz more recently claims to have reconfigured his ambition; now it's to make more films than all other Chileans combined. More like a termite than like a white elephant (to adopt Manny Farber's suggestive terms), he still wants to forge a legend—and he has.

How has he managed to do so much? A number of interlocking factors come into play. For one thing, the hundred plays he wrote in his youth provided him with a lot of material to recycle. For another, at some point after moving from Chile to Paris in 1974, five months after the military coup, he began to accept all sorts of state-TV commissions (mainly French, but also German, English, Dutch, Portuguese, and eventually Italian); the idea was to refuse nothing, to keep on working—regarding filmmaking as an artisanal, everyday process. From an auteurist point of view, this creates several ambiguities—especially because many of Ruiz's TV commissions, no matter how recognizable to his fans, are essentially anonymous works for most of their viewers.

Within my experience, Ruiz is the least neurotic of filmmakers; he doesn't even seem to care whether what he's doing is good or not (and, as he's aptly noted, bad work and good work generally entail the same amount of effort). No single film functions as the be-all or end-all of an evolving career but merely as part of an overall process. Example: the 1985 *Régime sans pain*—one of his films most

influenced by his friend Jean Baudrillard, and perhaps the one that most calls to mind grade-Z SF—grew out of a commission to direct a music video. Ruiz offered a counterproposal that he direct several music videos rather than one; once this deal was made, he shot enough material to interconnect the various videos until he arrived at a feature.

A little later, while serving as the codirector of Le Havre's Maison de la Culture, Ruiz wound up producing his own films and those of many others—meanwhile producing, directing, and/or writing plays and other theatrical events, writing novels, teaching, and creating museum installations. Over the past year, he's shot a movie in Taiwan, directed Marcello Mastroianni in his most accessible feature to date (*Three Lives and Only One Death*, 1996), contemplated becoming a French citizen, directed Catherine Deneuve in another movie (*Généalogies d'un crime*, 1997), and taught filmmaking for the second time at Duke.

If you're still wondering how he can accomplish so much—and be relaxed rather than frayed or frantic about it—an anecdote he told me a few years back may be more indicative of his secret than any other. During part of the period when he was writing his one hundred plays, he attended the University of Iowa's famous writer's workshop program. In a playwriting seminar, after arguing with a teacher who asserted that all drama is necessarily based on conflict, he went to see Kurt Vonnegut Jr., another teacher in the program, for advice; Vonnegut suggested he leave Iowa, and Ruiz did exactly that. (Soon afterwards he had a stint writing melodramas in Mexico. Ruiz to Ethan Spigland in *Persistence of Vision*, no. 8: "Mexican melodramas use the structure of nineteenth-century European melodrama, in which the main character never conducts the action but, instead, is moved by the action. It's a logic governed by miracles. In American soap operas and American stories in general, it is always a question of will.")

Once you decide that drama isn't based on conflict, a lot of unforeseeable things become possible, and the cinema of Raúl Ruiz is one of them. Look at the first chapter of his book *Poetics of Cinema* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1995), which spells out this argument in some detail, and even gives it some national, cultural, and political inflections:

> America is the only place in the world where, very early, cinema developed an all-encompassing narrative and dramatic theory known as central conflict theory. Thirty or forty years ago, this theory was used by the mainstream American industry as a guideline. Now it is the law in the most important centers of film industry in the world.

What are the implications of this law? Skip ahead thirteen pages to one of the chapter's closing arguments:

The criteria according to which most of the characters in today's movies behave are drawn from one particular culture (that of the USA). In this culture, it is not only indispensable to make decisions but also to act on them, immediately (not so in China or Iraq). The immediate consequences of most decisions in this culture is some kind of conflict (untrue in other cultures). Different ways of thinking deny the direct causal connection between a decision and the conflict which may result from it; they also deny that physical or verbal collision is the only possible form of conflict. Unfortunately, these other societies, which secretly maintain their traditional beliefs in these matters, have outwardly adopted Hollywood's rhetorical behavior. So another consequence of the globalization of central conflict theory—a political one—is that, paradoxically, "the American way of life" has become a lure, a mask: unreal and exotic, it is the perfect illustration of the fallacy that Whitehead dubbed "misplaced concreteness." Such synchronicity between the artistic theory and the political system of a dominant nation is rare in history; rarer still is its acceptance by most of the countries in the world. The reasons for this synchronicity have been abundantly discussed: politicians and actors have become interchangeable because they both use the same media, attempting to master the same logic of representation and practicing the same narrative logic—for which, let's remember, the golden rule is that events do not need to be real but realistic. (Borges once remarked that Madame Bovary is realistic, but Hitler isn't at all.) I heard a political commentator praise the Gulf War for being realistic, meaning plausible, while criticizing the war in former Yugoslavia as unrealistic, because irrational.

The metafictional universe of Ruiz is neither real nor realistic—only possible, or let's say conceivable, because Ruiz thinks and films it. Whether this makes it good or bad, commercial or uncommercial, is another matter, existing off somewhere in a parallel universe—and fortunately not one that Ruiz has to worry about much, because unlike practitioners of central conflict theory, he doesn't have to draw in large crowds in order to keep on working.

Does that make him crazy, or us?

2. In the Interests of Full Disclosure (Boston)

In 1990, when he was teaching at Harvard, presenting his first installation ("The Expulsion of the Moors") at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, and shooting his first American film (*The Golden Boat*), Ruiz was interviewed on Boston TV by critic David Sterritt, who asked him, "Do you have a particular audience in mind when you do your films?" "I think I'm quite friendly," Ruiz replied. "I have

a lot of friends, and these friends are from different countries and from different cultural and economic levels. My idea is to put all my friends together." He added that he assumed that all his friends were duplicated by people of similar tastes and temperaments, "so maybe the model of my audience is those friends."

For a little over a decade, I've been one of those friends—having met Ruiz at various times in Rotterdam, San Sebastian, Manhattan, Cambridge, Chicago, Washington, and, most frequently, Paris, his principal base of operations. I've seen about half his films and videos in many of the same places, as well as in Cannes, Locarno, London, Los Angeles, and Santa Barbara—in some cases without subtitles, in many cases with only partial comprehension. I've also been privileged to sample his superb cooking (specifically, a bouillabaisse prepared and served in discrete layers or "chapters"—a narrative form of cuisine evoked in more grotesque terms in the last episode of *A TV Dante: Cantos 9–14*, a 1992 series), and I once tried without success to snag him the commission of "completing" Orson Welles's *The Dreamers* (a treasured late project derived from two Isak Dinesen stories that yielded about half an hour of Welles footage).

In other words, I qualify as a Ruizian, even if I like some Ruiz films much more than others. The last time we met, in Paris last June, was shortly after I saw *Three Lives and Only One Death* in Cannes, which struck me as being the best of his movies I'd seen in a long time, though I quickly discovered it wasn't one of his own favorites (despite the fact that he fully acknowledged it as his own work). When I told him it reminded me of late Buñuel, he replied he didn't regard that as a compliment—much preferring Buñuel's Mexican films to his late, French works, and his own 1995 *Fado majeur et mineur* (which I hadn't much liked—or understood, for that matter) to *Three Lives and Only One Death*. An earlier effort of mine to grapple with Ruiz ("Mapping the Territory of Raúl Ruiz," 1990) can be found in my collection *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (1995). What follows recasts a few of the same arguments, but generally the aim here is to correct, augment, and update many of my earlier remarks rather than duplicate them. Given that only four of Ruiz's features are currently available in the U.S. on video—*The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* (1978), *On Top of the Whale* (1982), *Life Is a Dream* (1986), and *The Golden Boat* (1990)—perhaps it would be most useful if I started with these.

3. *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* (Paris)

One of his first French TV commissions, and possibly the best of his black-and-white films. His assignment: to make an arts documentary on French writer and painter Pierre Klossowski—a novelist (one of whose novels, *The Suspended Vocation*, Ruiz had already adapted the year before), a commentator on the Marquis

de Sade, a brother of the painter Balthus, and a painter of some distinction in his own right. What emerged isn't really an art documentary, but it starts off by offering a deadly parody of one. Ruiz began by considering what TV documentaries were like in general: "I looked at television programs on famous personalities and observed that the usual format is a voiceover which poses questions. So I kept to this format and developed it into a kind of philosophical dialogue. This is the basic format, which is exactly the same as any banal television program on almost any subject." As pointed out by critic Ian Christie—probably the individual most responsible for introducing Ruiz to the English-speaking world—Ruiz's two principal strategies were "*parody* and *literalism*, both 'rationalist' in their pedigree and both calculated to subvert the normal discourse of television." Knowing the importance of slick production values in France, Ruiz hired the superb Sacha Vierny, who shot all of Alain Resnais's early features and has more recently worked for Peter Greenaway.

What's subversive about Ruiz's fulfillment of his assignment is that he essentially invented a series of fictitious paintings by a fictitious painter—invented, in turn, by Klossowski, who collaborated with Ruiz on the script—and got an actor to play a fictional art collector who has a dialogue with the offscreen narrator about the paintings. What comes out of this is not only parody but also a mystery story, an essay about representation, and, as critic Thomas Elsaesser puts it, "a very literary meditation on the subject of parallel worlds, of secret messages disguising themselves as accident and coincidence."

4 & 5. *La toit de la baleine* / *On Top of the Whale* (Holland and Patagonia)

At some point in the future, a "communist millionaire" (Fernando Bordeu) from Patagonia invites an anthropological couple in Holland (Jean Badin and Willeke van Ammelrooy) to come visit him with their son and study his Indian neighbors, Eden and Adam (Ernie Navarro and Herbert Curiel), the last survivors of a lost tribe. Dressed in black suits, this odd pair confounds the couple's efforts to penetrate their language ("'Today's rain hasn't the same name as yesterday's rain," for instance), but meanwhile the anthropologists and their son go through a number of profound alterations; the little boy even undergoes a spontaneous sexual change after gazing into a mirror and becomes pregnant.

Shot by the peerless Henri Alekan (whom Ruiz almost single-handedly brought out of retirement) in the Dutch countryside over twelve days, *On Top of the Whale* has a good many satirical points to make about culture, language, and representation. It unfolds in half a dozen different languages—one of them invented for Eden and Adam—and formal permutations are even more numerous than linguistic

ones. Each shot in this playful, poker-faced comedy becomes an event less in terms of plot than in terms of what Ruiz is doing with composition, color, perspective, camera placement, and visual texture. This is one of Ruiz's best collaborations with Chilean composer Jorge Arriagada—as much a mainstay in his work as Bernard Herrmann was for a spell in Hitchcock's—whose scores specialize in furnishing lush, atmospheric Hollywood climaxes, often without any apparent dramatic motivation.

6. *Mémoire des apparences / Life Is a Dream* (Le Havre)

This was derived from Ruiz's stage production of Calderón's Spanish play *Life Is a Dream*, which utilized a new French translation of two Calderón texts by Jean-Louis Schefer, another Ruiz friend and sometime collaborator. Both texts have the same title, *La vida es sueño*, but were written forty years apart, comprising respectively the "profane" and "sacred" version of the same story. Ruiz's stage production used the profane version, as does the film, although the latter also manages to incorporate a few elements from the sacred version.

In Calderón's original play, written in the 1630s, Segismundo, the son of the king of Poland, is imprisoned in a remote tower by his father after the latter's horoscope predicts that his son will depose him. Later, the king orders that Segismundo, still asleep, be brought to the palace for a day, and when there, Segismundo does try to assume power. When he awakes back in his tower prison, he assumes he dreamt the palace episode. Segismundo's curtain speech at the end of Act II, which has been compared to Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, concludes, in William E. Colford's translation:

> What is life? A Frenzy. What is life?
> A shadow, an illusion, and a sham.
> The greatest good is small; all life, it seems,
> Is just a dream, and even dreams are dreams.

In the third act, buttressed with his conviction, Segismundo leads the Polish rebels to the palace. In the "auto sacramental" version of the play, written in the 1670s, the characters become allegorical abstractions such as Wisdom, Free Will, Man, Grace, and Love. According to Colford, "Segismundo's triumph over himself is likened to the redemption of fallen man through the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion (Corpus Christi)."

In the movie—not so much an adaptation of the plays as a relocation of certain passages within a larger structure of Spanish baroque—these passages function in the story as a mnemonic device by which a member of the Chilean underground

resistance memorizes the names and addresses of fellow resistance members and, ten years later, tries to summon them up at a provincial movie theater that is apparently showing a film of the Calderón play. But the snatches of the movie we see don't come from a single source, comprising instead a whole smorgasbord of pop genres—space opera, film noir, swashbuckler, melodrama, even a bit of surrealist musical. This means that Segismundo's famous curtain speech plays over an Arabian Nights fantasy and a Flash Gordon adventure, and the theater auditorium itself becomes a second dream world where birds fly overhead, chickens strut below, a model train runs by, an old-fashioned Hollywood shootout takes place among the seats, and a police station is uncannily located directly behind the movie screen.

7. *The Golden Boat* (New York)

In November 1987, at a panel discussion held in Manhattan, one member of the audience, noting Ruiz's interest in wide-angle lenses and low and canted angles—constituting what many have called his Wellesian camera style—asked him if he'd ever contemplated shooting a film in 3-D. His deadpan answer was yes he had, and he'd even worked out a method: to paint all the actors and scenery red and green and distribute red and green 3-D glasses to viewers. "You could also do the same thing on the stage," he added helpfully.

This sort of laid-back alienation from narrative illusion—also reflected in his cherished project to film *Hamlet* with a cast of vegetables—leads to what might be regarded as both the boon and the curse of Ruiz's work, central to what is both good and bad about *The Golden Boat,* his only made-in-America feature to date. Shot by the resourceful Maryse Alberti (*Crumb*) and scored by the eclectic John Zorn (another pal of Ruiz's), it undermines its own premises so repeatedly and relentlessly in terms of settings, characters, and plot that it eventually becomes a kind of textbook illustration of the law of diminishing returns. (Even *Three Lives and Only One Death,* for all its relative charm and ease, skirts similar problems; as a French friend remarked, "If anything can happen in a film, nothing in it matters very much.") Visiting Ruiz at Harvard between the two long weekends he spent shooting *The Golden Boat* in New York and environs, I recall he was unhappy about the size of the crew, many times the size of what he was comfortable with; it seemed every film student in lower Manhattan wanted to work on the film, and he characteristically found it difficult to say no.

The movie does convey some of Ruiz's feelings about American violence, central conflict theory and all: the central figure is homeless serial killer named Austin (Michael Kirby), whose stabbings are so affectless that their main consequences are

chiefly formal. (In the first murder we see, the knife thrust coincides with the first of the film's many temporary shifts from color to black and white.) The young hero (Federico Muchnik) shifts blithely from being an artist and a *Village Voice* art critic in one scene to being a musician and a *Voice* rock critic a scene later, and his thesis adviser, initially played by writer Kathy Acker, is later transformed into Alina (Mary Hestand)—the first murder victim, resurrected without explanation. (A more systematic exploration of this principle can be found in *La Professor Taranne*, a 1987 adaptation of an Arthur Adamov play in which all eleven actors rotate their parts.) Physical space is equally mutable, and causal gags abound: when two characters repair to a diner, they each order a sushi dog and a wonton enchilada, and much of the dialogue pivots around absurdist exchanges like the following:

Tony (Michael Stumm): "Tell me, Amelia, do you love me or do you love the world?"
Amelia (Kate Valk): "You said it!"

All this makes for a lively, unpredictable surface, but over the film's eighty-three minutes, one progressively finds one's self caring less and less about what happens and why. The downside of Ruiz's metafiction is to make everything seem both like a metaphysical conceit and arbitrary; even when details remain pleasurable to the eye and mind (which is often), long-term emotional responses apart from amusement and a sense of passing through a troubled dream are fairly limited. Comparable feelings of drift infuse *Treasure Island* (1986) and the much better *Dark at Noon* (1992), both of which arguably suffer more than benefit from their relatively large budgets, their big-name actors, and their studied indifference to central conflict theory. In this respect, *Three Lives and Only One Death*, with its repertoire of twice-told tales like Hawthorne's "Wakefield" and Dinesen's "The Dreamers" and its supple employments of Mastroianni, fares much better in delivering Ruiz to a wider public.

At the same time, if one accepts Ruiz's limitations as part of an overall game plan, it's not merely his own cinema that becomes illuminated. Consider his recent defense of Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Black Cat* in *Projections 4½*:

> The film presents itself as a series of situations, each of which has an independent existence of its own: a game of chess, Bela Lugosi's cat phobia, allusions to an allegorical battle (Europe as a field of corpses), Bauhaus design. All these elements are stories that the film could do without, and which in the end stifle and obscure the central story. A bad critic would call these extraneous fragments "decorative."

Instead of helping to gradually reveal that narrative, as in a film which tells one single story, each of these stories dies outside the area of fiction that surrounds the narrative.

8 & 9. Autocritique #1 (Chile and Australia)

My 1990 essay on Ruiz is limited most of all by a reluctance to consider the Chilean aspects of my subject—preferring to regard "Ruiz" less as "a biological entity" than as "a particular point of convergence between different levels of culture" and a state of perpetual exile. Though I was limited at the time by having seen little of Ruiz's early work, none of which engaged me as much as his later stuff, I've been properly tweaked for this evasion by Zuzana M. Pick in her book *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project* (1993); Pick has helpful things to say about the Chilean aspects of French films like *The Three Crowns of the Sailor* (1982).

Since 1990 Ruiz has returned to Chile many times, resumed filmmaking there (in *A TV Dante*, for instance), and unearthed at least one more "lost" early feature, *Palomita blanca* (1973). What's disconcerting about the six cantos (9–14) of the *Inferno* that Ruiz "adapted" for Channel 4's *A TV Dante*, each of which begins with the title "Santiago de Chile" and runs for ten minutes, is that they rarely illustrate the original, at least not in any obvious way. (A typical unobvious way: to accompany "His speech alarmed me all the more for that," Ruiz offers a shot of a burning alarm clock.) As in the preceding eight cantos adapted by Peter Greenaway, Tom Phillips's translation is heard offscreen, with Bob Peck reciting Dante's lines and John Gielgud reciting Virgil's. But Ruiz gives us another Dante and Virgil onscreen, played respectively by Francisco Reyes and Fernando Bordeu (*On Top of the Whale*'s "communist millionaire").

In a brilliant lecture given to accompany an Australian screening and discussion of *A TV Dante* with Ruiz in 1993, critic Adrian Martin analyzed the multiple continuity errors in the opening shots of *Un chien andalou*—the figure of Buñuel with and without a watch and tie, for instance—as well as the eyeline match of Buñuel looking at the moon with the moon itself to describe four distinct ways that Ruiz creates "impossible scenes" while combining images: (1) the Hollywood eyeline match favored by Hitchcock to establish expectations of conventional continuity; (2) the graphic cuts of Russian montage (and TV commercials), exemplified near the beginning of the ninth canto of *A TV Dante* by a statue used as a foreground pivot in consecutive shots to construct an "impossible" space; (3) the style of French impressionist cinema, featuring such devices as superimpositions and seemingly unmotivated dissolves; and (4) the "free association" style favored by Maya Deren in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, where symbolic images (like

the aforementioned clock in flames) and physically disjunctive match cuts abound.

Ruiz noted paradoxically in the same Australian discussion that video makes it possible both to make and use films like maps—spaces for individuals to explore and move around in, as opposed to collective emotional experiences akin to theater. And insofar as maps can chart "impossible" spaces as well as possible ones—an idea explored in Ruiz's key 1980 short *Le jeu de l'oie* (*Snakes and Ladders*), made to promote a map exhibit—the philosophical and metaphysical adventures of Ruiz's work thrive on such potentialities.

10. Kid Stuff (Portugal)

Like picaresque orphan heroes, certain Ruiz films circle the globe incognito, or emerge unexpectedly in various disguises; for all his charm, Ruiz isn't any kind of sales agent, and his works remain at the mercy of those who are. The first one I ever saw, the maddeningly gratuitous *Vanishing Point* (1984), inexplicably wound up on German TV. My current favorite—along with *Of Great Events and Ordinary People* (1979), a documentary (about Paris elections) that astutely deconstructs the form, and *Mammame* (1986), an exhilarating and very Wellesian shot-by-shot "translation" of a Jean-Claude Gallotta dance performance—is the exquisitely poetic three-part Portuguese miniseries *Manuel on the Isle of Wonders* (1985). It was recut into a reportedly abortive shorter feature, *Manuel's Fates* (1986), and reviewed as such in *Variety*. After hoping in vain to resee the original for many years, I eventually found a French-dubbed, English-subtitled version once shown over three weeks on Australian TV, and it still looks as awesome as it did twelve years ago. It's the only Ruiz work I know whose strong emotion periodically breaks free of irony.

If we had anything resembling the rational film culture most critics routinely pretend we enjoy, we would all have ready access to this 150-minute masterpiece, whose original version is housed in the Portuguese Cinémathèque. Shot in 16-millimeter on the same Portuguese island where Ruiz previously shot *City of Pirates* and *Vanishing Point*, and starring his habitual child actor Melvil Poupaud (a Ruiz axiom), this offers the most sustained narrative enchantments and imaginative riches I've found in Ruiz's oeuvre, and the visual splendors of its untrammeled fantasy are perhaps rivaled only in *City of Pirates*.

Coming from a family of sea captains, Ruiz is entranced by sailor yarns, and the spirits of Stevenson and Dinesen—not to mention Richard Thorpe adventure movies—hover over many of his inventions. Sharing with Jorge Luis Borges a taste for Victorian fantasy, he has dreamed for years of filming *The Man Who Was Thursday*. *Manuel* is the only work of his I've found that places him within

hailing distance of Lewis Carroll, yet it remains little more than a vague rumor even among most Ruiz fans. Is this because world audiences have decided en masse that they'd rather see *The English Patient* and *101 Dalmatians*? Somehow I suspect that they—and we—haven't been offered the choice.

11 & 12. Autocritique #2 (Iran and Japan)

In my 1990 Ruiz essay, I claimed that *La chouette aveugle* (*The Blind Owl*, 1987) pointed to a "temporary exhaustion" on Ruiz's part and developed certain ideas in *Life Is a Dream*, "including the use of a similar provincial movie theater." Recently reseeing this mind-boggler after reading Luc Moullet's passionate defense of it in *Trafic*, no. 18 (Spring 1996), I now realize the exhaustion was strictly my own; apart from having something to do with dreams and movies, it has scant relation to *Life Is a Dream*; and the theater in the film—an Arab cinema—is neither similar nor provincial. Such are the dangers of seeing most Ruiz works unsubtitled and many years apart.

Based loosely on a famous and remarkable Iranian novel of the same title by Sadegh Hedayat (1936) and on a Spanish play by Tirso de Molina (1625), the creepy story concerns a young film projectionist working in Belleville (Ruiz's own neighborhood in Paris). Because much of what happens to him unfolds in dreams and because it's often impossible to separate his dreams from his waking life, or either from the Arab movies he projects, the film defies any ordinary synopsis. Moullet, who calls it "the most beautiful gem of the French cinema of the past decade"—though he perversely comes close to dismissing Ruiz's other films—avows, "I've seen *The Blind Owl* seven times, and I know a little less about the film with each viewing." Roughly halfway through the movie, the spoken language shifts from French (with snatches of German and Italian) to Old Spanish and Arabic—both of which are subtitled in fake Old French, but, as Moullet points out, not in a manner that corresponds to anything remotely resembling a correct translation.

A film in gibberish, you might say—as one might speak of the visual and conceptual gibberish of *City of Pirates*—but not a film that qualifies as arbitrary either, any more than the dreams it resembles are. And neither of the standard terms used for this sort of fantasia—surrealism or magical realism—seems quite adequate. Ruiz has an important relation to both, but he's also been careful to distinguish himself from these well-established programs. "My problem with the Surrealists," he told Ethan Spigland, "is that I have the suspicion that they wanted to keep you busy even while you were asleep. It's a capitalistic problem." And he can be differentiated from magical realists ranging from Gabriel García Márquez to Italo Calvino by virtue of the fact that he has a different relation to fiction. "My

films are not fiction films but about fiction," he said to either Adrian Martin or Christopher Tuckfield in *Cinema Papers*, no. 91 (January 1993). (The "interview" in question merged two conversations held three years apart, in suitable Ruizian fashion.) "I have been interested primarily in the problem of how more than one fiction can coexist in the same instant."

How more than one culture can coexist in the same space is no less important—providing the basis for such works as *On Top of the Whale*, *Treasure Island* (shot in both Portugal and Senegal), "The Expulsion of the Moors" (and its accompanying two-part book, *The Book of Disappearances* / *The Book of Tractations*, which includes a detachable foil mirror in order to read the pages printed backward), *A TV Dante*, *Las Solidades* (a 1993 short for the BBC that views Chile through the eyes of a classical Chinese painter), and *The Blind Owl*. Implicitly, it forms the context for *Tous les nuages sont des horloges* (*All Clouds Are Clocks*, 1988), a French feature freely adapted from a "Japanese mystery novel without a last chapter" by "Eiryo Waga" (actually, a pseudonym for Ruiz—who wrote this novel to be adapted by his screenwriting students at FEMIS, who were also assigned to come up with the missing chapter). The opening line of *Dark at Noon* is, "I have two passions—miracles and foreign languages," and in a way this personal motto describes both Ruizian obsessions: multiple fictions miraculously coexisting in time, multiple cultures linguistically coexisting in space. And whenever these obsessions are combined, his work becomes a lot more than fun and games. As Dave Kehr wrote in the *Chicago Reader* over a decade ago, "His work is not just a system—of narration, of language—reduced to chaos, but the spectacle of one system (Ruiz's system of imagining) devouring another (language's system of signifying). One order replaces another: it is revolution, not anarchy."

"A story is the connection between the objects in the set," Ruiz once wrote in an essay for *Afterimage*, no. 10 (Autumn 1981). And the connections between the objects created by Ruiz forge a precious legend at the same time that they tell a story—even if certain portions of that story and legend still remain scattered and buried, like clues in a treasure hunt—or like dismembered body parts turned into a jigsaw puzzle, a recurring notion found in such scattered Ruiz pieces as *Utopia* (1975), *Dogs' Dialogue* (1977, available on the same video as *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*), *Le borgne* (1981), and *The Blind Owl*. Put all the parts of the puzzle together, and you come up with a miracle, a fiction, a legend, an exile's notion of utopia, and a good many enduring objects, spread out over vast reaches of time and space.

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Back in Style

Bertolucci's *Besieged*

Many times over the past three decades I've been close to giving up on Bernardo Bertolucci. The rapturous lift of his second feature, *Before the Revolution* (1964), promised more than he seemed prepared to deliver with the eclectic *Partner* (1968). Yet it was *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970) rather than *The Conformist* (made just afterward and released the same year) that renewed my faith in his talent. Both movies, like *Before the Revolution* and *Partner*, were the flamboyant expressions of a guilt-ridden leftist, a spoiled rich kid with a baroque imagination and a social conscience that yielded dark and decadent ideas about privilege and guiltless fancies about sex. Where they differed for me was in the degree to which *The Conformist* succumbed to fashionable embroidery, a stylishness that took the place of style.

It was the relatively big-budget *The Conformist*, an adaptation of an Alberto Moravia novel, that made Bertolucci's name in the world market and so influenced American movies that Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy would have been inconceivable without it. But it was the more ponderous and adventurous *The Spider's Stratagem*—a TV commission adapted from a Jorge Luis Borges story, "Theme of the Traitor and Hero"—that showed Bertolucci truly grappling with his material and not merely with his markets. His mise en scène may have overwhelmed his content, marking him as a mannerist, but there was nothing glib about that content, and the mise en scène was more than just decorative. Yet both elements were too European to capture the American market—unlike the glossier *The Conformist*, so decorous it suggested one of Marshall Field's window displays.

So when *Last Tango in Paris* emerged as the next Bertolucci feature, catapulting his reputation into the stratosphere, it was clear that, for better and for worse, he'd found his overall commercial direction. Then his daring project to adapt Dashiell Hammett's communist novel *Red Harvest* fell by the wayside, to be replaced by the star-driven blockbuster *1900*—an attempt to mount a Marxist historical pageant on the scale of *Gone with the Wind* that wound up dissatisfying just about everyone (including Bertolucci, after seventy-two minutes were chopped from his English-language version). Next came the less prestigious but arguably more interesting *Luna* (1979) and *The Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*

(1981), followed by *The Last Emperor* (1987), which signaled a new commercial configuration characterized by Bertolucci's determination to make films only in English, regardless of setting or subject matter; in the 90s this yielded *The Sheltering Sky*, *Little Buddha* (which was also recut for the U.S.), and *Stealing Beauty*.

For me the best of these was *The Last Emperor*—if only because it suggested a temporary resolution to the uneasy competition between Marx and Freud that had dogged Bertolucci's work from the beginning—and the worst was *Little Buddha*, a film that floundered conceptually and sprang to life only momentarily, approximating the magic of a fairy tale. But all three confirmed that Bertolucci was no longer a mannerist with a manner, or even a culture, he could call his own. Even *Stealing Beauty*, which represented his return to Italy after over a decade of wandering the globe, seemed a good deal more tentative and cautious than any of his exciting early work; I liked it more than many of my colleagues did but concluded that Bertolucci was still feeling his way back to his stylistic roots.

Besieged—like *The Spider's Stratagem*, a small-scale TV commission—marks Bertolucci's triumphant return to those roots. Admittedly, it adheres to the use of English that characterizes his last four features and lacks the intellectual ambitions of his first four. Moreover, its plot, adapted from a story by James Lasdun that I haven't been able to track down, is both slight and somewhat obvious. But as a piece of cinema, it's the most pleasurable new movie to arrive in Chicago this year, more sensual than *Last Tango in Paris* and more stylistically engaging than anything he's done since *The Spider's Stratagem*. I first encountered *Besieged* last year at the Toronto Film Festival (where it was titled *The Siege*); since then I've returned to it twice with a great deal of enjoyment, and I look forward to seeing it again, much as I would return to a favorite piece of music.

To call a movie a masterpiece when its subject matter is slight raises the issue of whether the metaphysical notion of "pure style"—that is, style divorced from content—is defensible or even imaginable. I don't think it is, but in the case of *Besieged* the subject is slight only in the sense of being intellectually and politically undeveloped, not in the sense of being stupid or apolitical. The movie's true focus as well as its distinction lies in moment-to-moment experience rather than in thematic overview, and Bertolucci's attentiveness toward and fidelity to that experience is precisely what unleashes his style. Most of this transpires without dialogue, through camera movement and editing, coordinating a powerful sense of place with the capacities of two very skillful actors, utilizing selective splashes of color to render stabs of emotion, and using pieces of music that range from classical piano to African pop to chart the shape, mood, and rhythm of separate sequences.

Though one obviously can't and shouldn't ignore the movie's theme, what that

theme consists of is whatever Bertolucci needs to capture the moment-to-moment experiences he's interested in, and not much more. (As Dave Kehr wrote in the March–April 1999 issue of *Film Comment*, "Where Bertolucci's characters were once united by their unexpressed desire to return to the warmth and security of childhood, to the love of a mother and the safety of a womb, they now define themselves by their denial of the past and their passionate embrace of the present.")

And what is that theme? The mutual seduction of an African woman named Shandurai (Thandie Newton) and an English classical pianist named Jason Kinsky (David Thewlis) in a Roman villa only a stone's throw from the Spanish Steps. How this comes about is the sum of the movie's concerns. Shandurai, a medical student, works as the pianist's housekeeper, having recently fled Africa after her husband, a schoolteacher in her unidentified native country, was thrown into a military prison for ridiculing the dictator in power. The seduction begins when Kinsky—a recluse who inherited the villa and its many artworks from his aunt and who gives occasional piano lessons to children—suddenly and awkwardly blurts out that he loves her and would do anything in his power to make her love him. Shocked and terrified, Shandurai screams back that he can get her husband out of jail—which proves to be the first indication Kinsky's had that she's married.

Nothing more on the subject is said by either of them. But as time passes and Shandurai sees the villa's various artworks—paintings, sculptures, and tapestries—gradually disappear, she comes to realize that Kinsky is responding literally to her impulsive challenge. After he sells his piano and she gets word that her husband, freed from prison, will join her in the morning, she gets drunk on the bottle of champagne she's bought for the occasion, tries to write a simple thank-you letter to Kinsky, concludes before the night is over that she loves him, and proceeds to his bedroom. After a night of drinking on his own, Kinsky is fully dressed but fast asleep; Shandurai undresses him and lies down beside him. In the early dawn, when her husband rings the doorbell downstairs, she hesitates, then gets out of Kinsky's bed to greet her husband, and the movie ends.

If *Besieged* were a piece of music, it would be easier to defend; one could simply fall back on the wisdom of Duke Ellington when he said, "If it sounds good, it *is* good." But even though *Besieged* is mainly structured in visually appealing ways around pieces of music that sound good, it can't be justified that simply, especially now that some colleagues of mine (all of them white Americans) have been calling it racist and colonialist. I don't agree with either of these charges, but they deserve some response, particularly because they suggest some interesting differences in cultural conditioning and positioning, in relation to history as well as geography.

Let me begin with the first chorus of the only song in Spanish I've ever known by heart, the Mexican folk song "La llorona" ("The Weeping Woman"), first in Spanish and then in English translation:

Todos me dicen el negro, llorona,
    Negro pero carinoso. [repeat]
Yo soy como el chile verde, llorona,
Picante pero sabroso. [repeat]

They all call me the black man, weeping lady,
    Black but affectionate.
I am like the green chile, weeping lady,
Spicy but delicious.

I've remembered this song all three times I've seen Bertolucci's movie and responded to its erotic treatment of Newton, the English actress who plays Shandurai and embodies the film's central consciousness. (Born to a Zimbabwean mother and a British father, Newton lived in Zambia until she was three, when her family moved to England; at eighteen she made her screen debut in the Australian feature *Flirting*, which she dominated almost as much as she dominates *Besieged*. All the pieces of African pop music used in the film, incidentally, are her own selections.) My association of the film with "La llorona" arose partly because I misunderstood "el negro" to mean "black woman" instead of "black man," until a Latino friend recently corrected me, but this error changes none of the song's relevance. I would argue, in fact, that *Besieged* is racist in the same way and to the same degree that "La llorona" is—to my mind, not at all, at least in the context in which I came to understand it. I learned "La llorona" from folksinger Guy Carawan at Highlander Folk School—a coed, interracial civil rights camp staffed in part by former freedom riders—during the summer of 1961, at the same time that I and my fellow campers learned "We Shall Overcome," which we sang only slightly more often. This was long before notions of racial separatism became prominent in the civil rights movement and even longer before puritanical notions of political correctness began to wipe out the permissibility of such sentiments. As best as I can recall, no one at Highlander in 1961 objected to this song in any way.

I suspect that if Shandurai didn't arrive at the conclusion—however drunken or momentary—that she loved Kinsky, the charges of racism and colonialism would have been less likely. One might even argue that, though it's highly productive as the wet dream of a guilty white Italian male filmmaker (more productive, to my taste, than the racial and colonial conceits of a *Star Wars* movie), the

plot isn't very believable. Shandurai's fluency in at least three languages and her status as an A student in med school, combined with her strenuous housekeeping chores, is theoretically possible, yet at times it seems nervously overdetermined—rather like making Sidney Poitier the equivalent of a Nobel Prize–winning doctor in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* Kinsky's virtual self-obliteration in the service of his passion is similarly possible but also difficult to grasp when we know practically nothing else about him. Even if we decide that the movie is an allegory, requiring types rather than fleshed-out characters, one might easily object that casting an actress whose skin color is café au lait to stand in for black Africa is tantamount to cheating.

This is why I insist on calling the story (which functions formally like a libretto) slight and why another colleague understandably calls the movie a piece of fluff—the same sort of fluff that apparently became a hairball for my more puritanically inclined colleagues. But that doesn't mean Bertolucci would have made a better movie if he'd cast a blacker actress than Newton to play Shandurai, made her character less of an overachiever, or provided Kinsky with more of a back story. What this movie is about is the particular interaction of this fluff, these actors, this house, this set of musical pieces, and the stylistic invention of this director. To impose any other set of coordinates on such a story is to reject what they produce together, to dazzling effect.

Significantly, given the film's confined and well-defined sense of terrain, every scene set in Africa occurs in one of Shandurai's dreams, though the first of these scenes, which opens the film, is identified as a dream only in retrospect, when she's awakened by rumbling sounds from her maid's room in the villa. (The scene passes from a *griot*—an African storyteller-musician—to the hospital where Shandurai works to the schoolroom where her husband is arrested and concludes with the reappearance of the *griot;* like most of the film, it's an adroit blend of objective exposition and Shandurai's subjective impressions.) After she gets out of bed and starts to look for the source of the rumbles—a brief passage punctuated by jump cuts to convey her fragmented waking consciousness—she discovers it's the sound of a dumbwaiter, which she's been using as a cupboard, being lowered from a higher floor. Opening the cabinet, she finds a sheet of blank music paper with a question mark drawn on it.

The next sequence shows us Kinsky waking in the morning upstairs when his alarm goes off, getting into a robe, and walking to a window just in time to see Shandurai passing on the cobblestone street below, en route to the subway. After examining a patient with other medical students, she arrives home while Kinsky is playing his grand piano upstairs and starts to do her housework, dusting the sculptures, making his bed, and collecting his shoes (and catching a glimpse of Kinsky passing as she snags one of the shoes from under the bed).

Practically all of the film unfolds in this fashion, with a minimum of dialogue, a great deal of play on glances and gestures, and fleeting impressions of sounds as well as images. Apart from recreating the evocative syntax of silent cinema even more effectively than *The Thin Red Line*—especially when solo piano pieces, most of them performed by Kinsky, serve as traditional silent-movie accompaniments—the pleasures of the film's style largely consist of the artful mosaic patterns created by the arrangement of passing details. Or, to describe it in musical terms, the melodies created by linking various notations as if they were tones, yielding playful rhymes (cutting from a dark pink orchid to an umbrella of the same color, or from a flow of beer to a wash of soap suds) as well as reprises (two 180-degree camera tilts that frame a dream Shandurai has as she sits at her kitchen table).

As I've already suggested, the limitations of this game are more conceptual than formal, but manner and meaning reinforce each other most when various pieces of music—usually classical piano pieces (by Mozart, Grieg, Bach, and Chopin) or African pop tunes—orchestrate the minimal action. On a couple of occasions, when musical seduction becomes the issue, either Kinsky or Bertolucci himself comes up with a form of attempted fusion. One of these is a rhythmic piano piece played by Kinsky as a kind of serenade to Shandurai; the other is one of McCoy Tyner's ecstatic piano solos in John Coltrane's first recording of "My Favorite Things."

The latter piece is heard when Shandurai spies Kinsky half-asleep on a sofa, and the fact that we can't be sure where this music is coming from—inside his head or hers, coming from an unseen radio or simply from the film itself, where the fluctuating consciousnesses of the two characters find some temporary and haphazard meeting ground—only intensifies the magic of the sequence. *Besieged* is the movie's title, but "bemused" and "bewitched" better describe what these characters do to one another and what their subtle interplay often does to us. It can happen only in a movie, but what better place for it?

—*Chicago Reader*, June 11, 1999

The Young One

Buñuel's Neglected Masterpiece

Let's start with a dream scenario, a movie that might have been. What if Luis Buñuel made a picture with an American producer, an American screenwriter, and American actors during the height of the civil rights movement and set it in the rural South? What if the main character were a jazz musician from the North fleeing from a lynching, falsely accused of raping a woman? And, to make a still headier brew, what if Buñuel decided to work in the theme of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, a recent best-seller—the deflowering of a young girl by a middle-aged man?

As a piece of exploitation, this hypothetical project fairly sizzles; yet in the hands of a poetic, corrosive, highly moral filmmaker like Buñuel, it could well transcend this category. Allowing for the strangeness that naturally arises from a foreign director taking on such volatile American materials—indeed, a strangeness that might enhance the freshness of his treatment—one could well anticipate the beauty and excitement such an encounter might produce.

The above scenario may sound far-fetched. But the fact of the matter is that what might have been actually exists, and has existed for the past thirty-three years. Luis Buñuel did all the things I've mentioned in 1960, but hardly anyone noticed—and most of those who did were far from pleased. Roger Angell accorded Buñuel's film a dismissive paragraph in the *New Yorker*, the big Manhattan dailies were hostile, and, according to Buñuel, "A Harlem newspaper even wrote that I should be hung upside down from a lamppost on Fifth Avenue. . . . I made this film with love, but it never had a chance. American morality couldn't accept it. It hardly did any better in Europe and even today, it's hardly ever shown."

Ever since I first saw *The Young One*, in Paris in the late 60s, I've never been able to accept the public consensus. The film has been all but written out of film history—accorded scant attention in most studies of Buñuel and even less notice elsewhere. Very few people seem aware that it exists. At the same time, it's impossible to imagine a time when such a movie could ever become fashionable. Apparently simple, it's riddled with dark ironies and subtle ambiguities, and the surrealist high jinks that were Buñuel's calling card at the very beginning and end of his career—most often figuring as signature interludes in his Mexican pictures—are nowhere in evidence.

Now Facets Multimedia is showing a new 35-millimeter print, recently released by Milestone Films, and you can judge for yourself. *The Young One* doesn't have the immediate impact or legibility of Buñuel's best-known works, and though it never fundamentally betrays Buñuel's leftist convictions, it confounds so many workaday rules of political correctness—left and right, then and now—that no one could ever see it as any sort of tract. Buñuel has rightly called it one of his most personal projects, and it also happens to be one of the most pungent films about the American South ever made—though it was shot in its entirety in Mexico. One of his most sensual, sheerly physical works, it never qualifies as either pornography or sensationalism (though it was probably marketed as both), and its black comedy has a moral complexity typical of his finest work: the film refuses to label any of its five characters as a hero or villain. To quote Buñuel again, "This refusal of Manicheism was probably the major reason for the film's commercial failure."

It's worth bearing in mind, too, that *The Young One* was made a full decade after Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (*The Young and the Damned*) and only a year before *Viridiana*, the film that launched his highly successful "second" career as a mainly European director; it came at the tail end of a long period of low-budget Mexican pictures, most of which received very little international notice. In other words, it lacked a market in 1960, despite the racial and *Lolita* themes, because Buñuel still hadn't become a "brand-name" director, a recognized auteur. Yet at the moment, even with the Chicago Film Festival in full force, it's hard to think of a better movie playing in town.

Over the strains of Leon Bibb singing "Sinner Man"—the only sound-track music we hear in the film—a black jazz clarinetist named Traver (Bernie Hamilton), fleeing for his life, arrives in a stolen boat at a game-preserve island off the Carolina coast. Miller (Zachary Scott), the game warden, kills a rabbit and brings it home to his shack, where he finds that his alcoholic handyman Pee-Wee has just died. Pee-Wee's orphaned teenage granddaughter, Evvie (Key Meersman), is putting on the dead man's boots in the adjacent cabin and sniffling when Miller arrives, but he's hardly affected. They cursorily bury Pee-Wee in the backyard—Evvie wants to bury his liquor bottle, too, until Miller sharply reprimands her for "wasting bad whiskey."

In the morning, after Miller takes his boat into town, Evvie encounters Traver while tending to the beehives. Ravenous, he takes some honey from her but pays her $20 for one of Miller's shotguns and some of his canned goods. They establish a wary friendship, and after Traver accidentally causes a leak in his boat, she supplies him with tools to repair it. When Miller returns that day and discovers

that a black man has taken some of his things, he promptly chases after Traver, tries to kill him, and shoots several holes in his boat.

Several more tense confrontations and power shifts between Traver and Miller follow, complicated by the presence of Evvie; the object of Miller's growing lust and Traver's casual ally, she's innocent of sexuality and racism alike. (And unlike Lolita's, her innocence can't be taken for flirtatiousness.) After Traver agrees to work temporarily as a handyman for Miller in return for board while he repairs the boat, he spends the night in Pee-Wee's cabin, causing Evvie to move to Miller's shack and thereby enabling Miller to consummate his lustful designs on her. Things are complicated still further by the arrival from town of a Protestant preacher (Claudio Brook) and Miller's boatman, Jackson (Crahan Denton), who discover at about the same time that Traver is fleeing from a rape charge and that Miller raped Evvie the night before.

The complex moral and practical trade-offs that ensue are too labyrinthine to recount in detail here, but it should be stressed that they're at the heart of the movie. In fact, the film basically consists of nothing but intricate transactions and exchanges—of goods, money, services, gifts, promises, favors, epithets, injuries, and loyalties. In the final analysis, Buñuel refuses to condemn or exonerate anyone; to suggest only part of the film's audacity, he shows that the smitten child abuser overcomes some of his racism once he becomes a potential fugitive from justice, and one of his motives is wanting to win back Evvie's respect. Traver—the only urban sophisticate in the movie, in contrast to the primitive rural feudalism of the other four—winds up sparing Jackson's life in order to avoid another excuse for a lynching, but he's hardly idealized: in one scene, trading war stories and racial insults with Miller, he's made to seem almost as childish as his persecutor.

Jackson, who never ceases to be a monstrous bigot, isn't judged unequivocally either; Buñuel clearly sees him as a crude, pathetic moron but also as the product of his conditioning, not simply as evil. By the same token, Buñuel appreciates but never patronizes Evvie's "uncivilized" innocence, and we're actually persuaded to wonder whether the preacher will have any more beneficial effect on her than Miller. When we briefly see her near the end, just before she leaves for town, playing hopscotch in her hobbling high heels (a present from Miller), we're led to ponder what price her "civilizing" at the hands of either man is likely to have. As for the preacher, he's shown as principled, pious, and overtly nonracist, but that doesn't prevent him from asking Evvie to flip Traver's mattress before he'll sleep on it himself.

A few words on the script, cinematography, and casting. The film is very loosely inspired by a 1957 Peter Matthiessen story, "Travelin' Man," that's radically dif-

ferent in most particulars, apart from the swampy setting and its predatory inhabitants, which are rendered in detail. (Traver in the original is an escaped convict and arsonist who loves to fight—a much tougher customer, and neither a musician nor a Northerner—and he winds up getting killed at the end by an unnamed white man corresponding roughly to Miller, whom he's just clubbed; no other characters appear in the story.) The script is credited to "H. B. Addis" and Buñuel; the former is the pseudonym of Hugo Butler (1914–68), a talented blacklisted screenwriter who moved to Mexico in 1951. The following year, under another blacklist pseudonym, he coscripted Buñuel's only other film in English, the equally neglected *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, and his fascinating filmography also includes MGM prestige pictures of the late 30s and early 40s (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Young Tom Edison*, *Lassie Come Home*), Jean Renoir's *The Southerner*, some of the best films of blacklisted directors John Berry (*From This Day Forward*, *He Ran All the Way*) and Joseph Losey (*The Prowler*, *The Big Night*, *Eva*), and Frank Tashlin's first feature (*The First Time*).

The cinematographer is the great Gabriel Figueroa, who shot most of Buñuel's best Mexican work (including *The Young and the Damned*, *El*, *Nazarin*, and *The Exterminating Angel*), and he can be credited for much of the film's physical impact. Aside from Meersman, the actors are professionals: Zachary Scott, the best known, had already appeared in such Hollywood movies as *The Southerner*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Ruthless*, and *Appointment in Honduras*, while Bernie Hamilton is perhaps best known for *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, *The Devil at Four O'Clock*, and *One Potato, Two Potato*. Claudio Brook, the preacher, was actually a Buñuel regular—the only non-American in the cast—and despite the awkwardness of his slight Spanish accent, his Reverend Fleetwood is a memorable and effective creation; his performing of Evvie's baptism is priceless.

Approached superficially and ungenerously, *The Young One* might at first seem like a bad imitation of *Tobacco Road*; if one confuses its deceptive simplicity with simplemindedness, as some viewers have, it might even come across as camp. "How old are you?" Miller asks Evvie after noting that she's starting to blossom physically. "I use t' know when Mom was alive, befo Gramps brot me out here," Meersman replies, in a delivery so flat as to make her seem not so much a bad actress as a nonactress. (Buñuel reported having so many difficulties directing her that he almost closed down the production, but in fact Meersman's vibrantly unpolished presence turns out to be one of the movie's clearest and sturdiest triumphs.) "You know," Miller says, preparing to grasp her thigh, "they tell the age of a horse by his teeth, but with a woman or a hawg, it's flesh and weight that counts."

Many reviewers in 1960 alluded to Tennessee Williams, but apart from the southern setting, they couldn't have been further from the mark. A much more probable literary source is William Faulkner, whom Buñuel on other occasions showed some interest in adapting. In fact, Evvie registers at times as a younger, less idealized Lena Grove from *Light in August*—an innocent, semimindless character who knows precisely who she is and remains wholly secure in her identity as long as she remains on the island, unlike all the existentially unfocused and perpetually bargaining male "actors" surrounding her. (Meersman's lack of guile, actorly and otherwise, also intermittently suggests a more glamorous version of Robert Bresson's Mouchette as she goes about her daily chores.) Miller's and Jackson's casual meanness and the preacher's square sincerity, both observed with ironic wit, also suggest Faulkner, but at the same time they're quintessentially Buñuelian, revealing a humorously dispassionate view of human behavior and its contradictions.

The island itself—where all the action, apart from a brief early flashback, transpires—is a palpable, living presence, with its swarming and chattering insects and varied plant and animal life: a character in its own right, closely identified with Evvie. Buñuel establishes this universe as elemental and predatory from the outset. A few minutes into the film Traver has eaten a live crab and Miller has shot a rabbit, and these men are far from the only predators; not long afterward, Evvie knowingly steps on a tarantula, and we see a badger eating a chicken. But the natural world, like the characters, is never presented formulaically: Buñuel looks at everything with the amused curiosity of an entomologist or anthropologist, though the society and world he examines are not fundamentally different from our own.

—*Chicago Reader*, October 8, 1993

In Dreams Begin Responsibilities

Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*

Writing about *Eyes Wide Shut* in *Time*, Richard Schickel had this to say about its source, Arthur Schnitzler's 1926 *Traumnovelle:* "Like a lot of the novels on which good movies are based, it is an entertaining, erotically charged fiction of the second rank, in need of the vivifying physicalization of the screen and the kind of narrative focus a good director can bring to imperfect but provocative life—especially when he has been thinking about it as long as Kubrick had"—that is, at least since 1968, when he asked his wife to read it. This more or less matches the opinion of Frederic Raphael, Kubrick's credited cowriter, as expressed in his recent memoir, *Eyes Wide Open.* But I would argue that *Traumnovelle* is a masterpiece worthy of resting alongside Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," Kafka's *The Trial,* and Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl.* Like the Poe story, it features a phantasmal masked ball with dark and decadent undercurrents, and like the Kafka and Hedayat novels, it continually and ambiguously crosses back and forth between fantasy and waking reality. But it differs from all three in having a development that might be described as therapeutic—Schnitzler, a doctor, was a contemporary of Freud—making *Eyes Wide Shut* a rare departure for Kubrick and concluding his career with the closest thing in his work to a happy ending. Moreover, the question about the novella isn't whether Kubrick has "brought it to life"—it lives vibrantly without him, even if he has brought it to a lot of people's attention, including mine—but whether he's done it justice, a problem also raised by his films of *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange.*

I read *Traumnovelle* before I saw the movie, which hindered as well as helped my first impressions. The last time I tried this with a Kubrick film was when I read Stephen King's *The Shining* before seeing the film and found that King's novel, whatever its literary limitations, was genuinely scary, whereas Kubrick's movie, for all its brilliance, generally wasn't. Yet practically all of Kubrick's films improve with age and repeated viewings, and, scary or not, his version of *The Shining* fascinates me a lot more than King's. I can't say the same about *Lolita;* Vladimir Nabokov's novel improves with rereading a lot more than Kubrick's film improves with reviewing. And *A Clockwork Orange* is a draw: I embrace the moral ambiguity of Anthony Burgess's novel and detest the morality of Kubrick's film, yet I'd rather see the film again than reread the novel. In the case of *Eyes Wide Shut* I'm

inclined to think Kubrick has done Schnitzler's masterpiece justice. Allowing for all the differences between Vienna in the 20s and New York in the 90s and between Jews and WASPs, it's a remarkably faithful and ingenious adaptation. Kubrick made this movie convinced that relationships between couples haven't significantly changed over the past seventy-odd years, and whether you find it a success probably depends a lot on whether you agree with him.

I won't attempt a full synopsis, but I have to outline chunks of the first two-thirds of the plot to make certain points. Bill Harford (Tom Cruise), a successful New York doctor, and his wife, Alice (Nicole Kidman), the former manager of a Soho art gallery, attend a fancy Christmas party at the town house of Victor Ziegler (played to perfection by Sydney Pollack), one of Bill's wealthy patients, where each engages in flirtation—Alice with a Hungarian lounge lizard, Bill with a couple of models. Bill recognizes the orchestra's pianist, Nick Nightingale (Todd Field), as a former classmate and chats with him briefly; later he's called upstairs by Ziegler to help revive a naked hooker he's been screwing who's overdosed on drugs. Bill and Alice make love when they get home that night, clearly stimulated by their flirtations, but the following evening, after they smoke pot, Alice begins to challenge Bill's total confidence in her faithfulness by telling him a story that shocks him, about her passionate attraction to a naval officer she glimpsed only briefly when they were at Cape Cod with their little girl the previous summer.

Called away by the death of a patient, Bill is haunted by images of Alice having sex with the officer, and his night and the following day and night turn into a string of adventures consisting of sexual temptations or provocations that come his way with and without his complicity—all of which prove abortive. The dream-like interruptions and certain passing details share some of the same hallucinatory texture—as they do in Schnitzler's story—so that even waitresses glimpsed in a diner and coffeehouse and a gay hotel desk clerk suggest sexual possibilities. The daughter (Marie Richardson) of the man who has just died is engaged to be married soon yet suddenly declares her love for Bill. Wandering the streets afterward, he's harassed by college kids who think he's gay (in *Traumnovelle* the hero is Jewish and the students anti-Semites), then picked up by a prostitute named Domino (Vinessa Shaw). He finally winds up at the Sonata Café, where Nick Nightingale is playing with a jazz quartet. Nick has a gig later that night as a blindfolded pianist at a costumed orgy in a country house on Long Island, and Bill, after discovering the password, persuades Nick to give him the address. He then proceeds to a costume-rental shop to acquire a tux, cloak, and mask, and takes a taxi to the house. Eventually exposed as an intruder, he fears for his life until a masked woman mysteriously offers to sacrifice herself for him.

When he finally arrives home he wakes Alice from a troubled dream involving

the naval officer and an orgy in which she participates while laughing scornfully at Bill, which she recounts. It's one of the movie's many indications that the unclear separations of imagination and reality include many rhyme effects between Alice's dreams and fantasies and Bill's reality, as well as rhymes between her fantasies and his (such as her having sex with the naval officer). In fact, though the film initially appears to be mainly about Bill because it follows him around more than Alice, Alice's confession and dream are just as important as anything that happens to him; in some respects, thanks to Kubrick's (and Schnitzler's) careful calibrations in the storytelling, she makes an even stronger impression than he does, especially because she seems more in touch with her fantasy life than he is with his own—and because every other woman in the movie is in one way or another a doppelgänger for her.

Some of the other rhyme effects create disquieting connections—between a sexual invitation at Ziegler's party ("Do you know where the rainbow ends?") and the name of the costume shop (Rainbow) and between the password to the orgy, "fidelio," which suggests the Italian word for "faithful," and Bill's failure to betray her there. (Schnitzler's story is full of comparable echo effects: there the password to the orgy is "Denmark," which happens to be where the hero's wife was tempted to commit adultery.) There's even a subtle, eerie rhyme between a figurine briefly glimpsed on a table in the scene with Marie Richardson and one of the masks at the orgy.

Eyes Wide Shut has a lot to say about the psychological accommodations of marriage—and has a sunnier view of human possibility than any other Kubrick film, in spite of all its dark moments. It depends on a sense of the shared mental reality of a couple that almost supersedes any sense of their shared physical reality, a strange emphasis that's probably the source of most of the confusion felt by everyone in the course of processing the story. (A similar sense of shared mental reality can be found in the title characters of Schnitzler's startling, almost equally masterful 1913 novella *Beatrice and Her Son*.) A list of the things we never learn about the characters is at least as long as the list of things we know with any certainty. We remain in the dark about how the wife happens upon the mask worn by the husband at the orgy, about the accuracy of Ziegler's account of many of those same adventures, and even about whether they happen outside the husband's imagination. Yet there's never any doubt about what transpires emotionally between this husband and wife.

For years, two misleading adjectives have been used to describe Kubrick's work: "cold" and "perfectionist." "Cold" implies unemotional, and it simply isn't true that Kubrick's films lack emotion. They're full of emotions, though most of them

are so convoluted and elusive that you have to follow them as if through a maze—perhaps the major reason his films become richer with repeated viewing. He so strongly resists sentimentality that cynicism and derision often seem close at hand, and one difficulty I had with *Eyes Wide Shut* the first time I saw it was accepting the caricatural side of Kubrick—his handling of Cruise's "normality" in the lead role as Dr. William Harford and the mincing mannerisms of the gay desk clerk—as something other than malicious. My memory of Kubrick's mocking inflation of Jack Nicholson's narcissism in the second half of *The Shining* made me think he was being equally diabolical here about Cruise's narcissism, but a second look at the movie has rid me of this impression. Maybe Steve Martin would have made a more interesting Harford; according to Michael Herr in *Vanity Fair*, Martin was Kubrick's first choice for the role twenty years ago. But using a real couple such as Cruise and Kidman had obvious advantages as well.

That Bill Harford lies to his wife about both his lust for the models at Ziegler's party and the reason Ziegler called him upstairs identifies him at the outset as a glib hypocrite who thinks privilege can get him anywhere—which differentiates him somewhat from Schnitzler's hero—but that doesn't mean Kubrick views him with contempt. The remainder of the story may undermine Harford's confidence, but Kubrick doesn't let us know whether his recounting of his nocturnal adventures to Alice near the end of the movie is fully or only partially honest—we don't hear any of it. All we know is that it brings them both to tears.

Ironically, the major difference between Kubrick and Schnitzler may be that Kubrick is more of a moralist, even if he's unusually subtle about it. The only important invented character in *Eyes Wide Shut*, Ziegler, is the only one I regard as unambiguously evil. But Ziegler's evil, unlike mad Jack Torrance's in *The Shining*, is wrapped in impeccable manners, so some viewers may conclude that he's an OK guy. I saw his darker side mainly in glancing hints, such as his momentary reluctance to wait an hour before sending home the hooker after she recovers from her drug-induced coma. He's a charming monster—a statement about class and power and a composite portrait of every Hollywood executive Kubrick ever had to contend with. In this respect, Ziegler is closely allied to the highly cultivated General Broulard (Adolphe Menjou) in *Paths of Glory*—the true villain of that film, in contrast to the more obvious and scapegoated villain, General Mireau (George Macready), who's openly hypocritical and malicious.

The climactic dialogue between Harford and Ziegler in Ziegler's huge town house—a remarkable scene that runs a little over thirteen minutes—has been getting some flack from reviewers who claim it explains too much. But it explains nothing conclusive, apart from Ziegler's Zeus-like access and power—in a billiards room that seems to belong on Mount Olympus, like the château in *Paths of Glory*—and Harford's ultimate remoteness from those reaches; Ziegler holds all

the cards, and we and Harford hold none. Critic David Ehrenstein recently told me he thought *Barry Lyndon* was Kubrick's most Jewish movie in its depiction of social exclusion, but that was before he saw *Eyes Wide Shut*.

The second misleading label attached to Kubrick's work, "perfectionist," might be plausible if it were used to describe his choice of lenses, his ideas about décor, or his obsession with prints and projection. But usually it's used to describe his habit of demanding multiple drafts from writers and repeated takes from actors. Everyone seems to agree that such demands stemmed largely from Kubrick's not knowing what he wanted except through negative indirection, but this is a far cry from what's usually meant by perfectionism. His use of improvisation with actors to great effect—most famously Peter Sellers in *Lolita* and *Dr. Strangelove*, but probably also Timothy Carey in *The Killing* and *Paths of Glory*, and Kidman in some stretches of *Eyes Wide Shut*—further complicates this notion of perfectionism, as does his use of handheld cameras for filming violence in movies as diverse as *The Killing* and *Barry Lyndon*, which involves a certain amount of chance and improvisation. Kubrick came of age artistically during the same period as action painting, and in his work classical notions of composing frames and telling stories vie with other aspects of the artistic process that are more random and less controllable. (Paradoxically, Kubrick's perfectionism in some areas prevented him from being a perfectionist in others. He wouldn't allow the Venice Film Festival to show his films subtitled at a retrospective during the shooting of *Eyes Wide Shut* because he didn't have enough time to check the prints, so the festival had to show dubbed versions he'd already approved.)

Convoluted emotions and negative indirection are two ways Kubrick deliberately kept himself innocent of his own intentions, especially in his later movies. Positing himself as the ideal spectator of his own films, he wanted to be surprised by what his writers and actors did, and that entailed refusing to impose interpretations on his stories, striving to keep some particulars of his stories free from his intellect, and ultimately letting his unconscious do part of the work. (Jacques Rivette has used the same modus operandi in some of his own features, especially during the 70s.)

This dialectic between control and lack of control eventually became not only Kubrick's method but part of his subject. As Gilles Deleuze noted in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, "In Kubrick, the world itself is a brain, there is an identity of brain and world." Deleuze singles out such central images as the War Room in *Dr. Strangelove*, the computer housing HAL's circuits in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* as examples of what he meant, to which I might add the racetrack in *The Killing* and the training camp in *Full Metal Jacket*. Moreover, Deleuze writes, the monolith in *2001* "presides over both cosmic states and cerebral stages: it is the soul of the three bodies, earth, sun, and moon, but

also the seed of the three brains, animal, human, machine."[1] And in each film the brain, the world, and the system connecting the two start to break down from internal and external causes, resulting in some form of dissolution (*The Killing*), annihilation (of the world in *Dr. Strangelove* and HAL's brain in *2001*), mutilation (of the brain in *A Clockwork Orange* and the body in *Barry Lyndon*), or madness (*The Shining* and *Full Metal Jacket*, which also chart respectively the dissolution of a family and a fighting unit).

Building on Deleuze's insight, critic Bill Krohn has proposed, in the only plausible account I've read of the structure of *Full Metal Jacket*, that "the little world of the training camp . . . is portrayed as a brain made up of human cells thinking and feeling as one, until its functioning is wrecked first from within, when a single cell, Pyle, begins ruthlessly carrying out the directives of the death instinct that programs the organ as a whole, and then from without by the Tet Offensive, the external representation of the same force." As a result, in the second part of the film "the narrative itself begins to malfunction" along with the group mind, exploding "the conventional notion of character" and drifting off in several different directions.[2]

There's no such narrative breakdown in *Eyes Wide Shut*, which proceeds in conventional linear fashion throughout—though interludes created by a fantasy and a dream Alice recounts are every bit as important as waking events. This time the "brain" belongs to neither a single character (like HAL) nor a group (like the soldiers in *Full Metal Jacket*) but to a happily married couple—to their shared experience and the world created between them—and the threat of a breakdown, which forms the narrative, is eventually overcome. In this case the "identity of brain and world" is more explicit, and negotiating a relationship between the two, between dreaming and waking, is what the movie is all about. Even the title tells you that.

"Among those I would call the 'younger generation,' Kubrick appears to me to be a giant," Orson Welles said in a *Cahiers du cinéma* interview in the mid-60s, after the release of Welles's adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*. Stressing that *The Killing* was superior to *The Asphalt Jungle* and that Kubrick was a better director than John Huston, Welles added, "What I see in him is a talent not possessed by the great directors of the generation immediately preceding his, I mean [Nicholas] Ray, [Robert] Aldrich, etc. Perhaps this is because his temperament comes closer to mine."

Both Welles and Kubrick started out in their early twenties, both died at the age of seventy, and both completed thirteen released features. Another significant parallel is that both ended up making all the films they completed after the 50s in

exile, which surely says something about the creative possibilities of American commercial filmmaking over the past four decades. But in other respects their careers proceeded in opposite directions: Welles entered the profession at the top when it came to studio resources and wound up shooting all his last pictures on a shoestring and without studio backing; Kubrick began with shoestring budgets and wound up with full studio backing and apparently all the resources he needed.

On this basis one could argue that Kubrick succeeded in working within the system while retaining his independence on every picture except *Spartacus*, while Welles retained his independence sporadically, imperfectly, and ultimately at the price of working outside the system. Yet the price paid by Kubrick for his success—a sense of paranoid isolation that often seeped into his work and as few completed features as Welles—can't be discounted. (By isolation I don't mean to endorse the "hermit" myth that the press always attaches to artists who are reluctant to speak to reporters—including Thomas Pynchon and J. D. Salinger as well as Kubrick; I mean his more general habits as a relatively sedentary control freak who spent a lot of time on the phone.)

Inside and outside, interiors and exteriors, form as important a dialectic in his work as control and lack of control, which is perhaps one reason the interiors in his films gradually seem to grow larger—from the dingy lairlike apartments of *The Killing* to the château in *Paths of Glory*, from the spaceship in *2001* to the hotel in *The Shining*. This culminates in the palatial interiors of *Eyes Wide Shut*, which contrast with the claustrophobic railroad flat shared by two women and the cluttered costume shop. The throwaway and sometimes artificial quality of the exteriors conforms to the same expressionist system, and if the overall spatial orientation of the interiors at times recalls Welles, it's the Welles who wound up alternating oversize and cramped interiors in *The Trial*. Many reviewers of *Eyes Wide Shut* have been citing Martin Scorsese's *After Hours*—a picture even more indebted to Welles's *The Trial* in its handling of paranoia—but Welles's influence on Scorsese can be taken as a filtered form of Kafka's influence. (Kafka's story, unlike Welles's, is set almost entirely in cramped spaces.) In Schnitzler's novella the two scenes in the costume shop are already pure Kafka, especially in the uncanny way the relationships of the characters shift between the hero's two visits, and Kubrick catches both the queasiness and the unhealthy sexuality of Kafka at least as effectively as Welles did. Perhaps significantly, this is the only scene in which Kubrick allows the story's eastern European origins to come out, most noticeably in the accent and appearance of the shop owner (Rade Sherbedgia).

There are already signs that *Eyes Wide Shut* is dividing critics, sometimes along regional, even tribal lines. Most Chicago critics were enthusiastic—at least

until a lack of public support for the film apparently caused a certain backlash—but a good many New York critics weren't, apparently in part because the contemporary New York this movie conjures up—basically shot on sets in England, apart from a few stray second-unit shots of New York streets—isn't their city. It's true that Kubrick—born and raised in the Bronx but for many years an expatriate who refused to fly—didn't go near Manhattan in the 90s, and the movie clearly reflects that. But given the highly stylized and even mannerist nature of his late work, I can't see how this matters much. (There's some disagreement in the press about when he last visited New York. I'm fairly certain I spotted him in Soho in 1980 around the time *The Shining* came out; he was sloppily dressed and was methodically tearing down a poster from a street lamp advertising an interview with him in the *Soho News*.)

The kind of jazz played by Nick Nightingale in the Sonata Café seems a good two or three decades off, and the nightclub itself seems like an improbable throwback to the 50s. It's even more out-of-date than the nightclub jazz in the second feature of Kubrick's former producer James B. Harris, *Some Call It Loving* (1973)—a fascinating cross-reference to *Eyes Wide Shut* in its treatment of erotic dreaming that deserves to be better known. But if we can accept the precise yet highly stylized city of Fritz Lang's *M* as early-30s Berlin—and presumably Berliners of that period did—we shouldn't have any trouble accepting this paraphrase of 90s Manhattan.

Other objections include the film's methodical slowness (especially apparent in the delivery of the dialogue and the dreamlike repetitions of various phrases), its failure to live up to the hype and rumors about its sexual content, and the stupid and tacky digital "enhancements" added to the orgy sequence to fulfill Kubrick's contractual agreement to deliver an R-rated film. The enhancements, by exposing the routine idiocy of the MPAA ratings, may help to foster some overdue reform. At the very least they show how American adult moviegoers are treated like children, unlike their European counterparts who can see *Eyes Wide Shut* without these digital fig leaves, basically for the sake of Warners's money-grubbing, which allows for an eventual "director's cut" on video and DVD, generating more income while avoiding the risk of an NC-17 rating. Apparently corporate indifference to the public's understanding prevented most critics, including me, from seeing this movie until the last possible minute before writing their initial reviews. That Warners has also chosen to conceal the degree to which *Eyes Wide Shut* was unfinished when Kubrick died—he hadn't yet completed the sound-mixing, which, as David Cronenberg pointed out, can't be discounted as a creative part of the filmmaking process—clears the way for critics to complain that the public is being sold a bill of goods.

But Kubrick recut both *2001* and *The Shining* after they opened commercially,

and a climactic pie-throwing free-for-all in the War Room in *Dr. Strangelove*, filmed in color, was cut shortly before the film opened. Obviously what constitutes a "finished" Kubrick film has long been somewhat tenuous. Undoubtedly he would have made a few slight adjustments in *Eyes Wide Shut* had he lived longer—he probably would have fixed the bumpy sound-edit at the end of Bill and Alice's lovemaking scene and perhaps shortened the sequence in which Bill is followed by a generic bald man in a trenchcoat—which means that the released version is in some ways a rough cut. But I regard the opportunity to view a Kubrick rough cut as a privilege. What I resent is Warners's refusal to clarify which portions and aspects of the sound-mix were completed by others and how this was carried out—and the only defense I can think of for that is the profit motive.

Most reviews of every Kubrick picture since *2001* have been mired in misapprehensions and underestimations—many of which are corrected years later without apology, one reason he apparently gave up on critics about thirty years ago. This doesn't necessarily mean he was always ahead of his time: one of the best things about *Eyes Wide Shut*—evident in such artisanal qualities as the old-fashioned sound track, the grainy photography, and the exquisite color balances (such as the dark blue lighting of a bathroom behind one of Kidman's monologues)—is that it isn't a film of the 90s in most respects but something closer to what movies at their best used to be. (One might even argue that the film has something substantial to say about virtually every decade of the twentieth century *except for* the 90s.) The Harfords' apartment calls to mind an Otto Preminger noir film of the 40s or 50s, and the costume orgy harks all the way back to silent cinema—not to mention Georges Franju's *Judex*—in its ceremonial intensity.

The film credits a lighting cameraman but no director of photography, which has led critic Kent Jones to surmise correctly that Kubrick shot most of it himself. This is personal filmmaking as well as dream poetry of the kind most movie commerce has ground underfoot, and it's bound to survive a good deal longer than most of its detractors.

—*Chicago Reader*, July 3, 1999

NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 205–6.

2. Bill Krohn, "*Full Metal Jacket*," in *Incorporations* (*Zone* 6), ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Urzone, 1992), pp. 430–31.

The Best of Both Worlds

A.I. Artificial Intelligence

If the best movies are often those that change the rules, Steven Spielberg's sincere, cockeyed, serious, and sometimes masterful realization of Stanley Kubrick's ambitious late project deserves to be a contender. All of Kubrick's best films fall into one vexing category—they're strange, semi-identified objects that we're never quite prepared for. They're also the precise opposite of Spielberg's films, which ooze cozy familiarity even before we've figured out what they are or what they're doing to us. If *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*—a film whose split personality is apparent even in its two-part title—is as much a Kubrick movie as a Spielberg one, this is in large part because it defamiliarizes Spielberg, makes him strange. Yet it also defamiliarizes Kubrick, with equally ambiguous results—making his unfamiliarity familiar. Both filmmakers should be credited for the results—Kubrick for proposing that Spielberg direct the project and Spielberg for doing his utmost to respect Kubrick's intentions while making it a profoundly personal work.[1]

I can't agree with colleagues who label *A.I.* a failure because it's neither fish nor fowl—by which they often mean a failed Spielberg movie, not a successful or even semisuccessful Kubrick one. Neither fish nor fowl strikes me as precisely what a good SF movie should be; it's certainly what *2001: A Space Odyssey* was when it opened in 1968 before puzzled viewers, myself included. (Of course, *2001* qualifies as a stranger-than-usual Kubrick film, so perhaps it belongs in a different category altogether.)

When David Denby writes in the *New Yorker*, "Whatever is wrong with *A.I.*—and a great deal is wrong—it's the first American movie of the year made by an artist," he's not only trashing the work of hundreds of filmmakers whose work he hasn't seen—which must come from yearning for a world much simpler than our own, a yearning Spielberg generally speaks to. He's also making it clear that he has only one artist in mind, and it isn't Kubrick. Denby treated *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick's final film, with the kind of dismissive contempt that would have seemed excessive if it had been ladled on a James Bond feature, and I can only surmise that, for him, Kubrick doesn't even qualify as a bad artist, alive or dead. So Denby must have been hoping for another Spielberg film, much as I was hoping—even less realistically—for another Kubrick. But only if you accept that

A.I. can satisfy neither expectation will you understand the film's special achievements, which include redefining and expanding our sense of both filmmakers.

In fact, I find *A.I.* so fascinating, affecting, and provocative that I don't much care whether it's a masterpiece—a verdict that won't be determined for months or years anyway, and that would be useful right now mainly to exhibitors and DreamWorks executives. The example of both filmmakers' previous works and their often hysterical receptions should have taught us the folly of hasty evaluations. How many people are still calling *2001* "stupid" and "a celebration of copout," as Pauline Kael did, or *Saving Private Ryan* the film "to end all wars," as the *New Yorker* trumpeted on a cover wraparound? Calling a movie a masterpiece is in some cases little more than an impatient desire to close off discussion of its ambiguities and uncertainties, to deny that it's a living, and therefore evolving, work of art. *A.I.*, which often resembles two slightly distorting mirrors facing each other, is likely to unsettle and confound us for some time to come—and that's entirely to its credit.

Unlike Denby, I don't think that Spielberg's being an artist places him in some special category, and the flag-waving hypocrisy of *Saving Private Ryan* is one of the examples I could cite as a dubious use of his artistry. Given the different kinds of art they've made, I also wonder whether it's possible to reconcile the values of a "successful" Spielberg with those of a "successful" Kubrick in the same film. *A.I.* is, unavoidably, something of a shotgun marriage, though that's what allows it to defamiliarize Kubrick and Spielberg. *A.I.* is one of the most poetic and haunting allegories about the cinema that I can think of, and whoever made it possible deserves to be roundly applauded. It's also the most philosophical film in Kubrick's canon, the most intelligent in Spielberg's, and quite possibly the film with the most contemporary relevance that either one has made since Kubrick released *Dr. Strangelove* in 1964.

People who remain baffled that Kubrick ever proposed that Spielberg direct *A.I.* are perhaps succumbing to the media typecasting of both filmmakers. (Kubrick also considered directing and having Spielberg produce.) The two did have things in common: they were both middle-class Jewish prodigies and technical wizards who leaned toward war movies, SF, and adolescent sexuality and humor. But there were also practical reasons why Kubrick—who met Spielberg in 1979 in London, where he was doing preproduction work on *The Shining* and Spielberg was doing the same on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—thought of turning to him. After Kubrick explored in vain the eerie idea of creating an actual robot to play the lead part and perhaps of creating a digital performance, he recognized that his insistence on long shooting periods might make the aging of a child actor visible. Spielberg's speed on a soundstage and his masterful ability to quickly create a clear narrative—he reportedly shot *A.I.* in three and a half months, the same

length of time it took him to write the screenplay—eliminated that danger. (Kubrick also thought that Spielberg could handle sentimental material better than he could.)

Once Kubrick's brother-in-law and widow persuaded Spielberg to take on the project, believing he was the only one who had the right, he apparently did his best to honor Ian Watson's ninety-page script treatment and Chris Baker's six hundred drawings, both created under Kubrick's close supervision. Yet he also adapted the material to his own taste and inclinations, which seems the only logical way he could have proceeded. Reportedly, the most important changes made were in the story's middle section, which Kubrick had been dissatisfied with, where the robot character Gigolo Joe was a more twisted and less comic figure. By his own admission, Spielberg made him into something like a scoutmaster, and one wonders if the iconographic allusions to John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, another relatively innocent figure, are also his. Some reviewers seem happier with this character than with anything else in the film, but I'd argue that he stands at the furthest remove from the film's philosophical inquiry, apart from his chilling parting line: "I am . . . I was." As a character and as a robot he's obviously built to please, but he seems to carry off the former role more convincingly. (Spielberg backs away from showing him pleasing his clients in any detail.)

I hope that the film's major sources—Watson's treatment, Baker's drawings, and Spielberg's screenplay and designs (also done with Baker)—will eventually be made available; the drawings alone, or at least a selection, might make a swell DVD bonus. (Brian Aldiss's source story, "Super-Toys Last All Summer Long," is readily available.) These materials are far from exhaustive, because the project went through a gestation as complex as that of *Eyes Wide Shut*; Kubrick contacted at least four other writers to develop it at various stages—Aldiss, Arthur C. Clarke, Bob Shaw, and Sara Maitland—and there may well have been more. (Maitland, interviewed in a documentary made shortly after Kubrick's death, was brought in after Watson; she quotes Kubrick telling her, "I need someone to smear this with vaginal gel.") Perhaps much of this work was abortive, but it would be helpful to have at least the main outlines. And until the Watson and Spielberg scripts surface, any guesses, including mine, about which aspects of the film can be credited to which director are bound to be somewhat haphazard.

In a future where the greenhouse effect has melted the polar ice caps, flooding the earth's major cities and displacing millions of people, robots—or "mechas," as they're called here, in contrast to "orgas," meaning us organic folk—become more prominent, leading humans to fear that robots will outlive the human race. (This is what happens. "They made us too smart, too soon, and too many," says one

robot.) A scientist named Professor Hobby (William Hurt) proposes building a robot that can love not other robots—a possibility the film chooses not to explore, except indirectly—but human beings. This raises a moral question broached in the film's opening scene: what responsibility would humans have regarding such a creation? The implicit answer: about the same responsibility George W. Bush seems ready to take for curbing the greenhouse effect.

Hobby's creation turns out to be a boy named David (Haley Joel Osment), who's sold to Monica and Henry (Frances O'Connor and Sam Robards), a traumatized couple whose natural son, Martin (Jake Thomas), is in a coma. (One of countless Kubrickian references that surely wouldn't have been part of the film if Kubrick had directed it, Martin's kept in a see-through deep-freeze coffin recalling the hibernation berths of the astronauts in *2001*.) Warned that once he and Monica program David to love someone in particular they can't reverse their decision, Henry brings David home to Monica, who's initially horrified by the notion of anyone substituting for Martin and seems perturbed by such traits as David's inability to eat or sleep. But she slowly warms to the idea of an artificial son, at least as a concept, and when she eventually programs him to love her she recites her own name twice as part of the imprinting process, but not Henry's. The first sign that David has changed is when he calls her mommy instead of Monica.

Things start to unravel once Martin miraculously gets better and returns to the couple's suburban home, raising the specter of sibling rivalry. After David displays some aberrant forms of behavior in response to cruelties by humans—including cutting off a lock of Monica's hair at Martin's instigation and almost drowning Martin at his seventh-birthday party—Monica tearfully abandons him with his "super-toy" Teddy, a teddy bear, in the middle of a forest.

David is persuaded by the story of Pinocchio that Monica will love him if he becomes a real boy, and that goal becomes his obsession. He has various adventures with Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), another fugitive—barely escaping a Flesh Fair, where robots are brutally destroyed for the delectation of angry humans, and visiting Rouge City to consult a computerized oracle named Dr. Know. From there he's led via a quote from William Butler Yeats's "The Stolen Child" back to Professor Hobby in the remnants of Manhattan, where David discovers to his horror (and Hobby's delight) that he's merely a prototype, a "successful" experiment. Attempting two different forms of suicide—first by brutally destroying one of his many doubles (an especially creepy scene), then by falling from a skyscraper to the bottom of the ocean—he winds up inside a helicopter boat with Teddy, gazing at Pinocchio's Blue Fairy in the underwater ruins of Coney Island and pleading with her to make him a real boy.

Two thousand years pass, during which human life perishes but David remains firmly fixed on the Blue Fairy, who resembles Monica. He's discovered by future beings that resemble the aliens in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (except that they appear either to combine the categories orga and mecha or make them both irrelevant), who transmit his life story to one another through movielike pictures. Working from these projections, which recreate the suburban home where David once lived, and using the lock of Monica's hair that Teddy has preserved, they explain to David that they can resurrect her for one day only and then she must vanish forever—a move that recalls Monica's initial decision to program David with a capacity for love because she's granted the capacity to love him in return. The story concludes with their idyllic and implicitly erotic day together. ("The happiest day of his life," says the narrator. "There was no Henry, no Martin.") David recapitulates the story of his life in drawings for a doting but uncomprehending Monica, and she gives him a bath and a seventh-birthday party. Finally David tucks his mother in for good, and we're told by the narrator that "for the first time in his life" he goes to sleep, lying alongside her and winding up in "that place where dreams are born."

It sounds like typical Spielberg goo—for better and for worse—and when you're watching the film it feels that way. But the minute you start thinking about it, it's at least as grim as any other future in Kubrick's work. Humankind's final gasp belongs to a fucked-up boy robot with an Oedipus complex who's in bed with a clone of his adopted mother, and who finally becomes a real boy at the very moment that he seemingly autodestructs—assuming he vanishes along with her (though if he survives her, it could only be to look back in perpetual longing at their one day together). Real boy or dead robot? Whatever he is, his apotheosis with mommy seems to exhaust his reason for existing. As Richard Pryor once described the death of his father while having sex, "He came and went at the same time." Like the death of *2001*'s HAL, who might be regarded as David's grandfather, it's the film's most sentimental moment, yet it's questionable whether it involves any real people at all.

Similar paradoxes—soft and hard, warm goo and icy dryness, mother-love ocean (the first thing we hear and see in the film) and chilly waves that drown cities—are in force throughout. The cruelty of humanity and the warmth of David's yearnings are established as constants, yet it's in the nature of Spielberg's fuzzy styling that we don't always immediately recognize the cruelty—or all of the paradoxes in David's warmth. It may not be immediately apparent, for instance, that Professor Hobby, a Wizard of Oz figure, isn't really a nice fellow; he delights in David's misery because it proves his experiment has worked—even though it's hinted that he originally created David to fill an aching gap left by the loss of his

own son. It's implied, for that matter, that all robots point to such lacks, absences, and failures in the people who make them, though only at certain junctures does Spielberg encourage us to see that.

One might say that the emotional conflicts experienced by Monica when she first encounters David implicitly remain our own conflicts throughout the film, but Spielberg is too fluid a storyteller to allow us to remember this ambivalence much of the time. He invites us to fool ourselves just as we always do with his films and just as Monica sometimes does with David—a deception based on primal emotional needs and repressed realities. This repression is generally sustained in most Spielberg films, but here the repressed knowledge and emotions periodically come back like icy waves lapping around our ankles.

Sometimes Spielberg's own dark side comes to the fore, perhaps accounting for the two things in *A.I.* that I intensely dislike—the depiction of the human crowd at the Flesh Fair and the future beings' admiration for humans. Both seem to derive from what I often find objectionable in Spielberg's work. They reek of the influence of Disney's early cartoon features, especially *Pinocchio* and *Dumbo*, and of those films' ideological imperatives; this undoubtedly adds to the scenes' primal power, but I also think Spielberg loses control over this movie's meanings when he chooses such strategies. The brawling human crowd at the Flesh Fair is exclusively working-class—an irrational lynch mob howling for blood, with echoes of the Christian right—which implicitly absolves the middle class and the wealthy, particularly because this scene is meant to make the expulsion of David from the security and comfort of his suburban nest (which has so far dominated the film to the near exclusion of everything else) even harsher. I read this cheesy Mad Max rabble as a truer picture of Spielberg's view of his audience than we normally get—a view that helps to account for some of the most racist and xenophobic aspects of the Indiana Jones movies. (That the rabble's targets are machines and not people may justify the violence for some viewers, though the fact that the violence is carried out by rednecks may make it harder to swallow.)

The testimonials to humanity given by the future beings are a prime example of Spielberg's dishonesty working hand in hand with his fluidity as a storyteller. Their expression of admiration and even envy for the "genius" of humans leads them to conclude, "Human beings must be the key of existence." This sentiment runs counter to the view of humanity expressed by the remainder of the movie, and I'm guessing that Spielberg inserted it to make his fuzzy beings closer to the people-loving aliens he depicted in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* Nice try, but such sentiments belong to another movie.

These scenes aside, *A.I.* is consistently dialectical—almost to the point of schizophrenia and at times to the very edge of incoherence—most often with rich

and complex consequences. Take the end of the movie. Is the cloned Monica, resurrected and "corrected" to satisfy a robot's programmed cravings, much closer to something human than David, created and programmed by man in his own image? Is the love of either character genuine, programmed, or some combination of the two? The line separating life from death, being from nothingness, even the present from the past—"I am . . . I was," says Gigolo Joe as he gets hooked and reeled in by a scavenger-police plane like a hapless fish—remains as ambiguous as the line separating orga from mecha or human from inhuman that runs throughout the picture. It's a line very much like the one separating viewers from the characters in a film or video.

One nice thing about a potential masterpiece with two masters is that it throws the whole question of artistic intentionality—a dubious matter to begin with—straight out the window, because how could Spielberg know precisely what Kubrick intended or vice versa? Yet it's logical that *A.I.* should turn out to be an allegory about cinema, regardless of whether either filmmaker consciously had it in mind—not only because both men have devoted their lives to their obsession with cinema, a form of bringing the appearance of life to nonliving matter, but also because the prime issue for the modern world may be our willingness to treat nonliving matter as if it were alive and living people as if they were objects. This issue is raised every time we see someone walking down the street talking on a mobile phone and ignoring everyone else around, every time we hear a mecha voice on a phone or an answering machine, every time we turn on a TV set or computer, enter a movie theater, or start a car, or send or receive an e-mail, or fire a gun. All these extensions of human will—and many others—suggest the same problems and ambiguities.

So reading *A.I.* as a statement about cinema isn't much of a stretch. After all, it virtually begins with a woman (who turns out to be a robot in Hobby's lecture-demonstration) being stabbed and then asked to undress, two movie staples, and it virtually ends with David's life being transmitted to others in the form of movies and storyboards; the film's culmination is the ultimate oedipal movie payoff, complete with all of the lights in the house winking out. Given the heavy investment Spielberg has in single suburban mothers in his oeuvre and his biography, as well as all the implications of a Crate & Barrel version of domestic bliss, it's the definitive Spielberg conclusion—though it also complements the final sequence of *2001*. When the Blue Fairy comes back for an encore inside the suburban home, I'm immediately reminded of the monolith slab reappearing inside the hotel suite just before Bowman gets reborn as the Star Child. Quite possibly this rhyme effect is Spielberg's doing more than Kubrick's, because Kubrick, unlike Spielberg, hated to repeat himself or make film references—I can't imagine him

using scavenger mechas to allude to George Romero's zombies, as this movie does. But the parallel would probably be there in some form even without this underlining. Both locations are mental projections of the protagonist, but whereas *2001* ends with some kind of tragic rebirth, *A.I.* ends with the implication of some kind of sweet annihilation—something that might also be said to resemble the opium stupor at the end of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller.*

The problem of distinguishing between what's real and imaginary is a classic movie theme. The difference between Richard Dreyfuss toying with his mashed potatoes in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and David and his adopted parents laughing at the way Monica eats spaghetti in *A.I.* is instructive. The first scene asks us to consider the line between obsession and madness; the second asks us to consider the line between mechanical and real laughter—whether it's human or nonhuman. Each scene has unsettling aspects. But Dreyfuss's behavior is ultimately justified by the plot—when his mound of mashed potatoes matches a Monument Valley mountain site leading him toward an alien spaceship landing—while the laughter of David and his adopted parents becomes impossible to define as either forced or genuine, mechanical or spontaneous, leaving us perpetually suspended over the question as if over an abyss.

As David, Osment gives a remarkable performance that's fully attentive to such ambiguities, yet Spielberg keeps ensuring that we periodically forget or overlook some of the more troubling or problematic aspects of his tale—even though a few of them come back to haunt us afterward. This is nothing new in his work. The dramatic success of *Schindler's List* largely depends on making us forget or overlook many of the most troubling aspects of the Holocaust, as well as certain aspects of the real-life story that interfere with Spielberg's patriarchal agenda, such as the fact that Schindler's wife, Emilie, played an important role in saving the lives of Jews in Moravia.

In terms of plot, Spielberg has made the final sequence of *A.I.* somewhat incoherent so that he can articulate his oedipal idyll as cleanly as possible. It's similar in some ways to the terrain explored in *Solaris*—an inquiry into what it means to be human and what it means to die—without the spiritual side of Andrei Tarkovsky's Christian mysticism. And most of what gets repressed at some point in the film is articulated in another, so that the movie constantly swings between dizzying uncertainties and grim—or is it exalted?—finalities. It's part of this movie's richness that few of its contradictory ideas and emotions cancel one another out. Instead they congeal into a kind of poetry—a term I wouldn't ordinarily use to describe either director's work—whose melancholy, forlorn pungency is paralleled in the Yeats lines quoted at the penultimate stage of David's odyssey:

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping
than you can understand.

—*Chicago Reader*, July 13, 2001

NOTE

1. As I concluded about half a year later, "I suspect that Spielberg approached this project with more seriousness and more willingness to show fidelity to its source than he did when approaching the Holocaust or Oskar Schindler's life for *Schindler's List*. His limitations are still apparent in spots, but this film makes the usual distinctions between success and failure seem trivial." ("It's a Big World After All: The Top Ten (or So) Movies of 2001," http://www.chicagoreader.com/movies/archives/2002/0102/020104 .html) And as Spielberg noted, to his credit, some time after the film's release, when he saw the kind of negative press the film mainly got he realized he must have been doing something right, because this was the same sort of critical reception that all of Kubrick's late films initially received. [2002]

Under the Chador

The Day I Became a Woman

"Aren't you afraid?" some of my stateside friends asked before I visited Iran for the first time last February. "Only of American bombs," I replied. Notwithstanding all of the things that are currently illegal there—such as men and women shaking hands or riding in the same sections of buses—I'm not sure I've ever been anyplace where people display more social sophistication in terms of hospitality, everyday courtesy, or sheer enterprise in the use of charm and persistence to get what they want. Some of this character came through in *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998), a fascinating documentary showing the aggressive resourcefulness of Iranian women in divorce court, despite the repressive laws they have to work with.

The locals I spoke to tended to be pessimistic about the reformist movement—regarding Mohammad Khatami about as skeptically as American liberals regarded Bill Clinton during his last year in office—but it also quickly became clear that some aspects of Iranian life are not defined by Islamic fundamentalism and that what might seem hopeless in one context might be possible in another. Behind closed doors, things often turn out to be freer than one might imagine, especially for people who have money.

On the northern tip of Tehran is a mountain that was still snowcapped in February, and, when the sun was out, melted snow ran down gutters in the city below like rushing mountain streams. Well-off people live on the mountain, and two Iranian filmmakers I visited, Abbas Kiarostami and Darhius Mehrjui, were on the side facing south. Another filmmaker, Bahman Farmanara, was on the side facing north, and getting from Kiarostami's office to Farmanara's house entailed driving along parts of the route traversed in Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*. I wasn't surprised to find that Mohsen Makhmalbaf hasn't put the Makhmalbaf Film House on the mountain. For all his enormous success, Makhmalbaf remains in some respects a working-class hero in Iran, and his fundamentalist background serves as a reminder of how far he has traveled.

The credits for *The Day I Became a Woman* list Makhmalbaf as writer and his young wife, Marzieh Meshkini, as director. In the press book he writes:

> Five years ago, while I had been the most prolific Iranian filmmaker, with 14 feature films, 3 shorts, 28 books, and 22 editing credits over a 14-year career, I stopped making films and decided to make filmmakers. I started the Makhmalbaf Film House with only eight students selected among family and friends.
>
> After four years, the school graduated a cameraperson, a sound recordist, an art director, three directors, and an editor/photographer. During the course of their studies, my students also produced several films as their school projects, including *The Day I Became a Woman* by Marzieh, my wife, [and] *The Apple* and *Blackboards* by Samira, my daughter.

Some Western commentators have scoffed at Makhmalbaf's claims, maintaining that he's the real director of these three films and that his time would be better spent owning up to his auteur status. This position is not only dead wrong, but it smacks of ethnocentric, sexist, and imperialistic complacency. Insofar as contemporary Iranian art cinema can be split into two schools—one associated with Makhmalbaf, the other with Kiarostami—they're separated by, among other things, their relation to auteurism. (They're also separated by their relation to the written word: Makhmalbaf started out as a playwright and has published the scripts of many of his films, including the one for *The Cyclist* that we see his impersonator carrying on a bus in Kiarostami's *Close-up*; Kiarostami started out as a graphic artist and hasn't used scripts on any of his films for several years.) Despite personal details in such films as *The Peddler*, *The Actor*, and *A Moment of Innocence* and his appearance as himself in *Salaam Cinema*, Makhmalbaf can't be said to possess a single directorial style of his own, not even an evolving one. His films are held together by a social mission, not by a style of mise en scène or a style of filming or editing—in fact, he has often created pastiches of other directorial styles, most obviously that of Sergei Paradjanov in *Gabbeh*.

Furthermore, *The Apple* and *Blackboards*, though both scripted by Makhmalbaf, are centrally about community, which can't be said of any of Makhmalbaf's films as a director. We also know from his wife that he provided only the outlines of the three sketches in *The Day I Became a Woman*, whereas she wrote the dialogue, developed the characters, and prepared the shooting script. And while she was directing that film, he was shooting a picture of his own—*Testing Democracy*, which forms half of the feature *Tales of an Island*—albeit on the same island where Meshkini's feature was being shot. One could probably find auteurist

parallels between *The Day I Became a Woman* and Makhmalbaf's 1987 feature of three sketches, *The Peddler*, but that seems a particularly dull and unproductive exercise, one that flatters American conceits about individualism at the expense of Iranian notions of collectivity. Why insist on treating good *baba ghannouge* as if it were bad peanut butter?

Kish Island, located in southern Iran, is, according to the *Lonely Planet* guide to Iran, "a bizarre place: a little bit of Singapore with highways and towering apartment blocks and hotels; a quasi-Disneyland with theme parks; and a poor man's California with beaches and bicycle paths—all with a unique Iranian style. The main attraction for Iranians, however, is the availability of duty-free electrical goods." The beaches are relevant to all three sketches of *The Day I Became a Woman*, the bicycle paths are relevant to the second, and the highways, theme-park ambience, and electrical goods are relevant to the third. And everything looks gorgeous.

The Day I Became a Woman presents three allegories about being a woman at three separate stages of life: childhood, young motherhood, and old age.

Havva (Persian for "Eve"), who lives with her mother near the beach, is the heroine of the first story. It's the morning of the day when she turns nine—which in Iran is the day she becomes a woman—and this means she can no longer play with boys, specifically with her friend Hassan. But once it's established that she doesn't turn nine until noon, an hour away, she's allowed to run off until then. She finds that Hassan has been grounded by his sister until he finishes his homework, and she returns a little later with sour tamarind pulp and a lollipop, both of which she shares with him, putting each in his mouth for brief intervals. (According to Meshkini, the Iranian censors wanted to cut the shared lollipop, which they found too erotic; she stood her ground, and the film has already played commercially in Iran without cuts.)

The second heroine, Ahoo (Persian for "deer"), is part of a large group of women in chadors pedaling bicycles down a highway that runs parallel to the Persian Gulf. Her husband, uncles, and other male in-laws and the male elders of her clan all chase after her on horses, demanding that she stop her nonsense and return to family life, but she keeps charging ahead; the end of this sketch is deliberately unclear about whether they manage to stop her or not. Again according to Meshkini, Kish Island has the only bicycle path in Iran and is "the only place women can ride bicycles freely"—it's forbidden for them to do so in Tehran. (Makhmalbaf's utopian film school—which generally focuses on one or two

topics per month, many relating not merely to film but to sports, philosophy, business, and the arts in general—once devoted eight hours a day to skating and bicycling, so one wonders if the female students had to break the law to participate.)

The third heroine, the elderly Houra (Persian for "nymph"), arrives on the island in a wheelchair and hires a local boy to cart her around to shops in the local malls; thanks to a recent inheritance, she has the means to get what she's always wanted—furniture as well as appliances—and has tied colored strings around each of her fingers to remind her of what she wants. After depositing all of her goods on the beach, she returns to the malls in hopes of remembering the only item that's skipped her mind, while the boys in the vicinity unpack her goods, install them as if in a living room, and fool around with them. Houra returns around the time that a couple of the women bicyclists and Havva, now dressed in a chador, turn up to watch her leave—along with her goods, which the boys push out to sea on rafts.

The first story is the most realistic, the second is the most visceral—a sequence in giddy perpetual motion, as brilliantly polished as the Steadicam accompanying the little boy's toy car through the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*—and the third is the most surrealistic. All three heroines are extremely stubborn and know exactly what they want to do, but the only one pursued and confounded by grown men is Ahoo. By contrast, Havva and Houra are surrounded by boys, who set out to sea at the end of each segment, with or without the heroine; and to all appearances, Havva is pursued and confounded only by grown women.

Meshkini has said both that she doesn't consider herself a feminist and that she believes in equal rights for women—a kind of double-talk that seems frequent and perhaps even necessary in contemporary Iran. (Similarly, Jafar Panahi has claimed that his much more radical feature *The Circle* isn't even political.) Meshkini's unidentified interviewer in the press book notes that in the first story, "the girl loses her freedom; in the second, she is trying to regain it; and in the third, she has it but it is too late for her to do much with it." In response, Meshkini speculates that what Havva loses may be her childhood rather than her freedom.

Whatever she loses, the story conveys a keen sense of loss—one that brought me back to a moment in my own early grammar-school days when, simply because of my age, I seemed to lose the option of being friends with girls; when my best friend, Helen, and I proposed spending the night together, both of our mothers were scandalized. The second story, at least before its ambiguous ending, conveys a sense of release that's equally sharp. The third story is by all accounts the funniest, but it has its sad aspects too; the old woman keeps trying, without success, to adopt the boys she hires, and her rampant consumerism

makes this episode the most "modern" and the most American in the trio—it's like a hallucinatory vision of Miami that overlaps exteriors and interiors.

I've been told that Iranians can be just as color-conscious as Americans, so there's some reason to observe that most of the boys in this movie are black and that Havva herself is fairly dark-skinned—hints that there's an underclass in Iran and maybe that being black and being female are two versions of the same thing. The stories are simple enough, but they're also poetic in their resonance—intended to make an imprint on our dreams as well as our thoughts.

—*Chicago Reader*, April 6, 2001

Chains of Ignorance

Charles Burnett's *Nightjohn*

> Words are freedom, old man. 'Cause that's all that slavery's made of: words. Laws, deeds, passes: all they are is words. White folks got all the words, and they mean to keep them. You get some words for yourself and you be free.
>
> —Nightjohn, a plantation slave

I think a strong case can be made that Charles Burnett is the most gifted and important black filmmaker this country has ever had. But there's a fair chance you've never heard of him because he isn't a hustler, he's never had a mainstream success, and all his work to date has been difficult to pigeonhole. Born in Mississippi in 1943, though raised from infancy in Los Angeles, he was one of several key black filmmakers—including Larry Clark, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, and Billy Woodberry—to attend UCLA's graduate film program in the 60s and 70s. His first film to circulate widely, the remarkable 1977 *Killer of Sheep*, won prizes in 1981 at Berlin and Sundance (before it was known as Sundance) and was one of the first titles selected for the Library of Congress's Historic Film Registry. But it's never been commercially available on video, and his affecting *My Brother's Wedding* (1984) is equally difficult to come by. In 1988 Burnett received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, but he hasn't become any sort of household name since, even after moving out of the independent sector. Neither his 1990 masterpiece *To Sleep with Anger*, which starred Danny Glover and played the art-house circuits, nor his honorable but unexceptional 1991 TV documentary about U.S. immigration, *America Becoming*, has had much of an impact on the public.

Burnett himself blamed the meager promotional efforts of the Goldwyn Company, which produced *To Sleep with Anger*, for the lackluster reception it got in the black community. He probably had a point, though one could also argue that all of his first three features pose different versions of the same commercial dilemma: though they deal almost exclusively with the Los Angeles black community, they have few of the calling cards—apart from Glover's presence in the third—most black viewers associate with an entertaining night at the movies. The problem is essentially stylistic: his first two features, both made independently, were inspired by the Italian neorealists and postneorealists (Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* was a particular favorite), which probably made his work

more accessible to Europeans than to Americans. *To Sleep with Anger*, however, is so rooted in the experience of black American rural culture that it might well have bemused European viewers. At the same time, black viewers may have been put off by some of its art-movie characteristics, such as the film's concentration on character over plot, its subtle dark humor, and its dense, literary structure. Great works, if they're allowed time to sink in, have ways of finding and creating their own audiences, but *To Sleep with Anger* never had time to sink in. The consumption machine that devours and digests commercial releases weekly won't slow down for works that take a little longer to be recognized and appreciated, and we all lost out in the process.

The Glass Shield (1994)—in which Burnett ventured for the first time into a fictional world where white as well as black characters play important roles—was a lesser movie but a more substantial commercial release, escaping art-house distribution almost entirely. This time Burnett encountered a fresh set of problems, however, almost as if he were starting from scratch. Confronting the uncomfortable issues posed when a black rookie policeman (Michael Boatman) tries to fit in at an otherwise all-white L.A. precinct, Burnett's script almost seemed to anticipate some of his own difficulties in dealing with the Hollywood system. Among other problems, he had to contend with Miramax test-marketing the movie and subsequently requiring him to alter the ending before the film could be released.

Immediately afterward, Burnett made my favorite of all his films to date, the beautiful 12-minute *When It Rains* (1995), for French TV—a jazz parable about locating common roots in contemporary Watts. It's one of those rare movies in which jazz forms directly influence film narrative. The slender plot involves a good Samaritan and local *griot*, who serves as poetic narrator (Ayuko Babu), trying to raise money from ghetto neighbors for a young mother who's about to be evicted, and each person he goes to see registers like a separate solo chorus in a 12-bar blues. (Eventually, a John Handy album recorded in Monterey, a "countercultural" emblem of the 60s, winds up serving as a crucial barter item.) A glowing gem, *When It Rains* has paradoxically been perhaps the hardest film of Burnett's to see.

But his emotionally overpowering, almost perfectly realized fifth feature, *Nightjohn*, is his first wholly accessible movie and unambiguous mainstream triumph—though ironically it seems to have come at the cost of increasing his anonymity. If you subscribe to the Disney Channel, you've already had seven opportunities to see this picture since June 1. But unless you've been unusually attentive, there's a good chance you didn't know that Burnett directed it—especially if, like me and most people I know, you depend on the listings in *TV Guide* and the *Cable Guide*, neither of which mentioned him. (I'm told that the Disney Channel program guide did better by him.)

Nightjohn is about two rebellious plantation slaves forcibly separated from their families. Nightjohn (Carl Lumbly) teaches a twelve-year-old girl named Sarny (Allison Jones) how to read and write, in defiance of the law; the only other slave on the plantation who learned the alphabet, now an old man (Bill Cobbs), had a thumb and forefinger chopped off as punishment. The movie has plenty of the qualities one would expect from a Disney production, so there's every reason to approach it circumspectly, as I did. On one level, it's hokey, didactic, melodramatic, and contrived; compared with earlier Burnett features, the storytelling is slick, the acting punchy and declamatory. And for the first time Burnett hasn't written his own script for a feature; the "teleplay," loosely based on a short novel for young adults by Gary Paulsen, is by coproducer Bill Cain. Yet for all my initial doubts, the film not only grew on me but eventually won me over completely; and when I saw it a second time, a day later, it knocked me out.

The bad news is that Burnett's fans in this country can't count on the mass media to recognize and respond to their interest in him. Surely there's something seriously wrong with a communications system that can't get out the news that a new work by Burnett is available, and has been for the past six weeks—something I was made aware of only indirectly, through the Black Harvest festival. (Like many fellow Burnett enthusiasts, I'd known that a Burnett feature for Disney was forthcoming but knew of no way to find out when.) As Nightjohn himself might put it, the folks who put out *TV Guide* and *Cable Guide* got all the words, and they mean to keep them; current and potential Burnett fans had better apply elsewhere.

Working with a theme akin to that of Ray Bradbury's novel (and François Truffaut's film) *Fahrenheit 451*—though it's given a substantially different edge by being set in the historical past rather than the projected future—*Nightjohn* views illiteracy as a central adjunct of slavery. Yet it isn't merely a history lesson about people who lived some 165 years ago but a story with immediate relevance. As Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, a local filmmaker and teacher, pointed out to me, the movie often calls to mind a fairy tale—perhaps not surprisingly, given the Disney sponsorship. When I mentioned this notion to Burnett in a phone conversation he was inclined to agree, noting that the story is told from the viewpoint of a twelve-year-old girl—though he added that he didn't want anyone to come away from *Nightjohn* with the impression that slavery is the stuff of fairy tales. It's an understandable caveat: part of what's so wonderful about the film is its use of a fairy-tale feeling to focus on real-life issues, not to evade or obfuscate them as a typical Disney product like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* does. To put it somewhat differently, *Nightjohn*'s fairy-tale ambience is placed at the service of myth—myth that embodies a lucid understanding of both slavery and literacy. The two lead characters, Sarny and Nightjohn, may come across at times as superhuman

individuals, but the world they inhabit and seek to change is in no sense fanciful, and the emotions that dictate their actions are no less real.

The opening sequence perfectly illustrates the magical balance Burnett is able to sustain between fantasy and lucidity. Sarny, who acts as narrator, begins by saying that this is a story about Nightjohn, but it's also a story about her. Nightjohn, she adds, told her that "'all you got is what you remember,' and me—I remember everything. I even remember being born." Whether or not she remembers being born, her birth in a slave cabin is what we see next, and the dialogue in that scene offers an acute analysis of what values, economic and otherwise, come into play when a new slave is born, both to the slaves and to their master—especially in relation to color, gender, and working in the fields versus working in the house. The master, Clel Waller (Beau Bridges), enters the cabin just after the baby is delivered, smoking his pipe. "Thought you said it would be a boy," he says to Delie (Lorraine Toussaint), the principal house slave who's acting as midwife. Picking up Sarny, he remarks, "It dark—but she pretty," an idiomatic expression of the fact that skin color warrants an inhuman pronoun, gender a human one. "You just cost me money, gal," he continues—though whether he's addressing Delie or Sarny is unclear, and perhaps irrelevant. "Boy, he grow up to be worth a thousand; can't even give away a little gal."

"Well, that's good now, ain't it?" Delie says. "'Cause nobody givin' this girl away. A promise been made."

"You watch what you say, Delie," Waller cautions her. "You'll find yourselves in the fields and your easy days'll be over forever."

"Oh—you gonna make your wife run the house?" Delie responds sarcastically.

"The child stays," Waller concludes. "But you watch yourself, Delie." The story jumps forward a few years, to Waller selling Sarny's mother and Delie taking over as Sarny's de facto stepmother; Sarny says offscreen, "Delie says that my mother was beautiful"—suggesting that she doesn't remember her birth after all—and adds that she never knew her father.

Waller is the closest thing this movie has to a villain, but as Burnett demonstrated in *The Glass Shield*, he's too much a humanist to give us an unambiguous villain devoid of humanity and vulnerability, even when the villain is white and part of a corrupt system. Waller, we soon discover, is a rich man only in the sense that he owns slaves who pick his cotton. Unlike his older brother, James—the favorite son who was the beneficiary of their father's estate—he isn't economically secure; in fact he's deeply in debt to the local bank. We're gradually made to feel that the power he wields over his slaves is just about the only power he has; when he's a tyrant to his own family, it's almost invariably over issues involving the slaves. His wife, Callie—beautifully portrayed by Kathleen York as an embodiment of ineffectual yet sensitive Southern white gentility—is carrying on a flir-

tatious epistolary affair with a Harvard graduate (Tom Nowicki) who lives a few miles away; his older son, Jeffrey (Joel Thomas Traywick), is a relatively benevolent heir apparent reluctant to wield his father's brutality; and his youngest son, Homer (John Herina), is a demonic brat whose toilet training Sarny takes over. (The pivotal role in the plot played by this training—which at one point earns Sarny a cake to take back to the other slaves—is only one indication of how far *Nightjohn* stretches the usual boundaries of a made-for-TV Disney feature.)

Sarny's other main house job is spitting tobacco juice on Callie's roses to keep off the bugs—a rather vivid example of the kind of slave work necessary to maintain Southern gentility, and one of the few anecdotal details in Cain's extraordinary script carried over intact from Gary Paulsen's lurid short novel. Paulsen, a prolific author of children's books, states in a note to his 1993 novel that "except for variations in time and character identification and placement, the events written in this story are true and actually happened." Though he clearly deserves credit for providing the filmmakers with the kernel of their masterpiece, Paulsen heaps on violence and torture in a way that seems more appropriate to a Mickey Spillane novel than to Cain and Burnett's nuanced human landscape and intricate plotting. By contrast, the filmmakers use just the amount of violence needed for their story—which proves to be more than usual for a Disney picture—and not an ounce more.

As it turns out, Sarny's stash of chewing tobacco helps pay for her first lesson from Nightjohn. Indeed, economic exchanges and their practical and ethical consequences are at the heart of this story. Nightjohn is offered to Waller for $500, but after Waller examines the slave's back for lash scars and discovers from their abundance that he's a troublemaker, he agrees to pay only $50, which is enough for Nightjohn but not for his clothes. I suppose this scene could be read metaphorically as a reflection of Burnett himself working for the Disney Channel, a job that a filmmaker friend has described as "paying the rent"—though Burnett gives Disney much more than an ordinary wage slave would have.

Early on we learn that not only does Nightjohn know how to read, he escaped to freedom in the North some time ago but willingly returned to the South and slavery to teach other slaves to read. This, I suppose, is the trait most likely to make the character seem superhuman—matched by Sarny's remarkable ability to grasp the economic essentials of slavery, an understanding she displays in an exciting climactic scene with a sophistication unlikely in most adults. But it's a tribute to Lumbly's performance (he also played the very different part of the elder brother in *To Sleep with Anger*) that we accept his passionate commitment as real. Surely his involvement isn't radically different from the commitment of Northern blacks who went south to work in the civil rights movement 130 years later. And to the degree that we can accept Nightjohn and Sarny as real—and see

their story as some version of our own, whatever our form of enslavement—*Nightjohn* functions as a revolutionary film.

Why is literacy deemed so essential to liberation in *Nightjohn*? Arguably it played less of a role in the civil rights movement of the 60s than it should have, and it would be hard to argue that it plays much of a part in what passes for American leftist rhetoric today, particularly in the postliterate and subliterate world this movie is addressing. Paradoxically, literacy is called into play in this movie—with its references to Dickens, *Tom Jones*, and epistolary romances—much more often than it is in the source novel.

Nightjohn's statement that words are freedom isn't simply a slogan intended to make slavery taste sweeter; the significance of reading and writing in this movie is never abstract—repeatedly these are the means for finding where you are and what you can do to change the world and yourself. As the movie makes clear, there are separate but connected kinds of knowledge to be gained from letters and words and numbers; the many economic lessons the movie offers—only a few of which I've mentioned here—are part of this knowledge. Reading a newspaper story allows Sarny and the other slaves to learn about Nat Turner, the black revolutionary who led an army of sixty fellow slaves to kill almost as many white people (the only historical event alluded to in the film, making it possible to place most of the action around 1831). The movie gives a lot of attention to the relationship between reading and religion: when Sarny declares in church that she's been "saved," she's obviously talking about her recently acquired ability to read. And the film points to some of the complex ironies surrounding her education—and black Christianity in general—by showing Sarny stealing the white minister's Bible around the same time that she's baptized.

The ability to write means that two passes can be forged, allowing a slave couple to escape to freedom. And for Nightjohn (whose father learned how to write his own name without achieving literacy), literacy becomes the seal of his own identity: if A represents what he is and what he does—standing on his own two feet and opening up a universe "with no bottom at all"—B reminds him of his lost wife, whom he's still hoping to find. For Sarny, reading the master's ledger and the mistress's love letters means learning not only who your master and mistress are but what you can do with this knowledge—even what you can get away with. Considering what Cain and Burnett have gotten away with in the very belly of the Disney beast, it's a lesson well worth attending to.

—*Chicago Reader*, July 12, 1996; revised October 2002

Good Vibrations

Waking Life

> The cinema is an anti-universe where reality is born out of a sum of unrealities.
>
> —Jean Epstein

I must have come across this statement by Epstein, a French theorist and filmmaker (1897–1953), in the late 60s or early 70s, but I no longer remember where. I've scanned his writings on several occasions since, but I haven't found the quote. Sometimes I wonder if I read or heard about it in a dream—making it one of the unrealities Epstein is referring to.

Wherever the quote comes from, it applies beautifully to Richard Linklater's animated feature, *Waking Life*. The whole movie is a string of paradoxes and reflections about what's real and what's not, about when you're dreaming and when you're awake, and the unusual way it's put together seems calculated to complicate all of the issues it raises rather than resolve any of them. Over twenty-five days, Linklater, one of his coproducers, and a sound person shot a first version of everything we see in this movie with two relatively low-tech digital video cameras in and around Austin, San Antonio, and New York—basically taping a lot of people talking and walking, as well as listening and sitting. It's not clear how much of the talk was scripted by Linklater and how much was improvised, but if the methodology of his second feature, *Slacker*—the live-action Linklater film *Waking Life* most resembles—is any indication, it was mainly scripted. Much of the editing proceeded concurrently with the shooting. Then animator Bob Sabiston, credited as art director, spent about nine months with a software program he developed, a good many Mac G4 computers, and more than thirty artists who "painted" over the live-action footage, each one generally assigned one or more characters. About 250 hours of animation work were needed to create—or, more precisely, recreate—each minute of animated footage.

What emerges is so radically different from most animation we're accustomed to that the movie's mode perfectly matches its subject—the ambiguous borderline state between waking and dreaming as perceived by actor and sometimes animator Wiley Wiggins while he's drifting around. A constantly shifting panoply of visual styles conjures up a twitching and palpitating universe where everything is in a perpetual state of becoming, not only from scene to scene but from second

to second. In the final sequence—before Wiggins floats off into the sky to the strains of a tango, just after he's apparently woken up for the umpteenth time—he's walking down a neighborhood street where literally everything (plants, trees, cars, dead leaves, even separate sections of flat ground) is unstable and volatile, slipping and sliding and fluctuating with all the unpredictable freedom of an artist's brush or a deity's whim. In a world where absolutely nothing can be taken for granted, everything qualifies as a miracle of one sort or another, major or minor, and the business of this movie is to chart as many miracles as possible—dozens, hundreds, even thousands at a time, most of them minor yet exquisite.

One colleague has compared *Waking Life* to *Yellow Submarine*, and given all the hallucinogenic play with reality perceived as a nonstop construction, it's easy to see what he means. But the fashionable greeting-card style of George Dunning's 1968 cartoon extravaganza is miles away from the overall look of this much better movie, which comes closer to evoking the grimmer styles of contemporary graphic novels.

Paradoxically relentless yet easygoing, this philosophical jam session—with its incessant mutter of soaring words often playing a role like that of musical accompaniment, gliding in and out of our awareness and comprehension—is too laid-back to be experienced as an assault, yet it calls to mind a constant (if gentle) battering of everyday reality as it's usually experienced. That Linklater was born in Texas and never went to college undoubtedly has something to do with his "Aw, shucks" manner of interrogating the universe, something he does, quietly yet doggedly, without letup for 97 minutes. I'm reminded of a favorite aphorism coined by my father—mainly, like Linklater, an autodidact: "Life is a bowl of cherries—shot point-blank at you from a cannon." The cultural reference points include Philip K. Dick, Jean-Luc Godard (whose *Masculine Feminine* is cited when one disgruntled pontificator calmly douses himself in gasoline and lights a match), Federico García Lorca, Alberto Giacometti, Lady Gregory, Søren Kierkegaard, D. H. Lawrence, and Thomas Mann, yet the ambience couldn't be further from the breast-beating soul-searching of Woody Allen or Ingmar Bergman or from the psychedelic bombast of Oliver Stone; low-key, cracker-barrel Fellini is more like it.

This is Linklater's seventh feature to date—preceded by the super-8 *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* (1988, never released), *Slacker* (1991), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Before Sunrise* (1995), *SubUrbia* (1997), and *The Newton Boys* (1998)—and though it's the first animated film he's made, it also qualifies as a kind of composite remake of all these live-action predecessors. Like the first two, it's essentially plotless, drifting dreamily from one center of attention to the next.

Like *Dazed and Confused*, it features Wiley Wiggins. Like *Before Sunrise*, it includes Julie Delphy and Ethan Hawke (discovered in bed—a place their characters never got to during their day and night in Vienna—carrying on a continuation of one of their previous conversations). Like *SubUrbia*, adapted from a play written by Eric Bogosian, it's a fairly theatrical performance piece (which also applies to *Tape*, Linklater's eighth feature) and includes actors Adam Goldberg and Nicky Katt (who also played in *Dazed and Confused*). And like *The Newton Boys*, it has a scene filmed inside a jail in Lockhart, Texas—in this case with a tomato-red prisoner played by Charles Gunning, a veteran of both *The Newton Boys* and *Slacker*, seething with murderous revenge fantasies involving elaborate torture of the people who put him away (namely, us): "All you pukes are gonna die the day I get outta this shithole." In a way, this character's political alienation serves to stand in for everyone else's in the film—which is quintessentially American and hence automatically familiar.

There are other carryovers as well. Linklater puts in a couple of appearances that recall the memorable cameo that opens *Slacker*, in which he recounts a dream, discusses alternative realities, and is seen riding in the back seat of a car. And there's the "old anarchist" (Louis Mackey) from the same film, and Wiggins's mother (Mona Lee) from *Dazed and Confused*. But the key point isn't the copious self-referentiality; it's that Linklater—a cinephile who originally helped to found the Austin Film Society in order to teach himself film history—has been bent on remaking cinema in all its diversity since the start of his career, which makes a cartoon the logical next step. Having already taken on such staples as the youth movie (*Dazed and Confused*), the romantic love story (*Before Sunrise*), and the western and crime movie (*The Newton Boys*), it's worth speculating what he'll turn to next. Given that the last two—probably his two most underrated films—are emotionally as well as visually lavish reworkings and rethinkings of Hollywood splendors, I wonder when he'll get around to making a musical.

One of the strangest aspects of the movie is how much closer it comes to our everyday perceptual reality than the fancies of Disney and the other studio factories, despite—or is it because of?—the roughness and unsteadiness of the images, something you'd never find in a Donald Duck or Bugs Bunny or Tom and Jerry. This isn't because Hollywood cartoons offer talking animals and Linklater doesn't; on the contrary, at one point he offers us a monkey operating a 16-millimeter film projector and lecturing over the silent footage, as if to drive home the distinctiveness of his own approach. What's missing is the slickness of studio filmmaking, and what's added is an unpredictable sense of human agency *behind* each image, producing and inflecting its various attributes at every turn. (This

becomes especially eerie when the animation reproduces the effect of shaky handheld pans, as it does during the rehearsal of a tango orchestra that we see much later performing live.)

The press book of *Waking Life* insists that "there are no geographical references" in the film, and Linklater has made the same point in some of his interviews. Yet, as an occasional visitor of Austin, I can immediately recognize portions of the city at various junctures; the state capitol is plainly visible at least twice. And the pertinent effect of this recognition isn't that Austin is being represented but that it's actually being conveyed somehow, incidentally yet indelibly; the film literally takes me there.

Similarly, I could readily identify three of the sixty or so people rendered by the animation, all of them filmmakers—Linklater, Steven Soderbergh (seen briefly on TV telling an anecdote about an exchange between Louis Malle and Billy Wilder), and Caveh Zahedi, the codirector of *A Little Stiff*, holding forth on the ontology of cinema as discussed by the great critic and theorist André Bazin—and all three are captured, not simply caricatured or simulated, their overall presences and individual body languages caught in a way that's uncanny. Zahedi—viewed on a big screen by Wiggins, seated alone inside a movie theater—is especially impressive, a fascinating orchestration of flurries and intensities proceeding simultaneously in separate directions, though not exactly at cross-purposes: grandiloquently jutting explanatory hand gestures, hydra-headed wavy (and waving) hair resembling the pulsations of flames in a fire, bulging bug-eyes that mark his discourse like punctuation as they expand or contract. That he's mainly talking about Bazin's notion of film realism as "holy moments" created by "God incarnate" only adds to the heady brew.

Properly speaking, this novel blend of reality and unreality can't be credited just to Linklater, who organized the overall thrust and exercised veto power, or just to Sabiston. A cartoon feature may be the closest thing we have nowadays to a collective medieval enterprise like Chartres—the assembly of individual styles, accents, and peccadillos that relates as much to the sixty or so characters portrayed as to the thirty-plus animators. (Wiggins is apparently the only one who figured in both capacities. He worked on the scene where he rides on the subway prior to his meeting with writer-performer Speed Levitch on the Brooklyn Bridge; Linklater vetoed Wiggins's self-portraiture, saying it made him look too young, but Wiggins's backgrounds for that sequence remain.) Overriding everything is a mutual sense of sustained wonder about life and the universe, driven by a certain slacker intelligence full of healthy bemusement.

—*Chicago Reader*, October 26, 2001

Hell on Wheels

Taxi Driver

Perhaps the most formally ravishing—as well as the most morally and ideologically problematic—film ever directed by Martin Scorsese, the 1976 *Taxi Driver* remains a disturbing landmark for the kind of voluptuous doublethink it helped ratify and extend in American movies. Of all Scorsese's movies, *Taxi Driver*—being screened this week at the Music Box in a twentieth-anniversary "restoration" that's in stereo for the first time—is for me the most seductive, though I wouldn't call it either his best film (I'd choose the underrated *The King of Comedy*) or his most gut-wrenching (I'd pick the overrated *Raging Bull*). Most of the glamorous depictions of hell on earth and odes to stoical despair about a post-apocalyptic civilization found in monuments to capitalist-urban squalor, including *Blade Runner* and *Se7en,* can be traced back to *Taxi Driver,* and if it continues to exert an enormous claim on our imagination, this is surely because we continue to live in its vengeful, puritanical fantasies—as well as with the dire consequences of those fantasies.

Properly speaking, *Taxi Driver* has four auteurs, whose agendas are distinct in some specifics and overlapping in others: director Scorsese, writer Paul Schrader, actor Robert De Niro, and composer Bernard Herrmann. I'll start with Herrmann, in part because he's been the most neglected of the four, in part because he's the sturdiest link to the commercial filmmaking of the three decades preceding 1976. Herrmann is best known for his work for Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*), Alfred Hitchcock (eight films, including *The Wrong Man*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest,* and *Psycho*), François Truffaut (*Fahrenheit 451* and *The Bride Wore Black*), and Brian De Palma (*Sisters* and *Obsession*). He was so adamant about his aesthetic biases that he single-handedly succeeded in persuading De Palma to eliminate the entire third act from Schrader's script for *Obsession*—a radical abbreviation that was Herrmann's prerequisite for scoring the film. His last two major scores, for *Obsession* and *Taxi Driver*, give the films so much formal, emotional, and thematic shape that the usual rule of music serving as accompaniment often seems reversed, and the images, dialogue, and sound effects seem to accompany the scores.

Herrmann died at age sixty-four in Los Angeles on Christmas Eve 1975, only hours after he conducted the *Taxi Driver* score, which I would cite as the most

richly realized of all his late compositions for movies. The one time I met him was in a London editing studio only sixteen days before he died; though quite ill, he was deciding whether to score a French film on the basis of a few rushes at a screening I'd helped set up for a filmmaker friend. Herrmann's method of deciding involved a fascinating interface of aesthetics and business: he dictated a hypothetical instrumentation for a score to his secretary, added musicians' fees and French studio costs, and then decided whether it was worth his while to continue.

This interface of art and business is fundamental to the achievement of his *Taxi Driver* score, which helps disguise or at least rationalize the film's ideological confusions, all of which circulate around the psychotic hero, Travis Bickle (De Niro). It assigns them an emotional purity that nothing else in the movie expresses—an emotional purity that coalesces around two contrasting themes that are endlessly reiterated and juxtaposed. For the purposes of this discussion I'll call these the "heaven" and "hell" themes. The first is associated with Bickle's feelings toward two supposedly angelic female characters—a professional political campaigner he's attracted to, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), who's working for a presidential hopeful named Palatine, and a twelve-year-old street hooker he wants to save, Iris (Jodie Foster). (Bickle fails to develop any sort of relationship with Betsy, after making the cardinal error of taking her to a porn movie on their first date, but he improbably winds up "saving" Iris by killing her pimp—played by Harvey Keitel—and a couple of his associates.) The hell theme, at once more brooding and more bombastic, smoldering with repressed rage, is associated with the contaminated vision of Manhattan that informs Bickle's tortured, puritanical reveries from first frame to last.

The heaven theme is a lush, jazzy ballad of romantic yearning performed by alto saxophonist Ronnie Lang that suggests a much older and more upscale cultural tradition of big-city aspiration than anything else in the movie (except perhaps a few shots outside the Saint Regis Hotel)—a tradition closer to Herrmann's generation than to that of Scorsese, Schrader, and De Niro, who were all born in the 1940s. This lyrical "penthouse" lament suggests the dreaminess of Gershwin or Porter rather than any musical tradition directly tied to Bickle—a former Marine in his mid-twenties who opts for driving a taxi as an expression of his terminal loneliness, insomnia, and spiritual and social isolation. The benefits of using such a musical idiom to legitimize, sentimentalize, and romanticize—in short, to glamorize—Bickle's madonna-and-whore notions about women are incalculable. (To be fair, the bridge midway through this 32-bar standard introduces subtle doubts by becoming oddly polytonal—the muted trumpet and muted trombone playing in a different key than the accompanying strings and piano, conveying something of Bickle's dissociated state of mind. But the final eight bars revert to the chordal comfort of the beginning, landing the audience squarely on its feet.)

The hell theme combines flurries of rat-a-tat snare-drum percussion like military drumming (almost subliminally suggesting Bickle's former experiences in Vietnam and his various disciplinary measures of "self-improvement," ranging from push-ups to target practice) and discordant, growling sustained low notes played mainly by brass instruments, which are somewhat more evocative of other Herrmann scores (the power theme in *Citizen Kane*, for instance). The richly orchestrated darkness of this second theme also becomes associated with images of black males, violence, crime, street hustlers of various kinds, infernal gushes of steam (from gratings and manholes) and water (from fire hydrants), pollution, and the stench of New York in the summer—an overloaded package that, combined with a worshipful treatment of firearms (lighted and filmed in one pivotal sequence as if they were religious icons), validates the Calvinist hysteria, xenophobia, racism, and trigger-happy savagery of Bickle more effectively than anything he ever says or does, by treating them as the subject of monumental art.

Much as Herrmann's brilliance is used mainly against the film's ostensibly responsible social agenda—an agenda that labels Bickle a dangerous psycho rather than a Hollywood hero and that regards his implausible triumph at the end of the picture ironically—De Niro's remarkable playing of the character brings a charisma to the part that frequently contradicts or at least complicates the script's construction of him as a disturbed and disturbing creep. As Patricia Patterson and Manny Farber noted in "The Power and the Gory," the best critical study of *Taxi Driver* I've read, reprinted in the invaluable second edition of Farber's *Negative Space* (New York: Da Capo, 1998): "The fact is that, unlike the unrelentingly presented worm in Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, this handsome hackie is set up as lean and independent, an appealing innocent. The extent of his sexism and racism is hedged. While Travis stares at a night world of black pimps and whores, all the racial slurs come from fellow whites." Perhaps not quite all—Bickle at one point announces that he'll drive anyone anywhere, even "spooks"—but very nearly.

This form of dishonesty is of course ascribable to the script rather than to De Niro, but it's endemic in the star system, which thrives on the seeming resolution of such contradictions. How can Marilyn Monroe's Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* be simultaneously knuckleheaded and some sort of genius? Because the capacity of stars, unlike ordinary mortals, to be contradictory things at once allows audiences to slide effortlessly over the contradiction. Perhaps it was this capacity that made De Niro's Bickle—charismatic misogynist and psychopathic killing machine—a role model for John Hinckley when he attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan (as Bickle almost tries to assassinate Palatine) to impress Jodie Foster (whom Bickle "saves" by slaughtering a number of Lower East Side lowlifes): not exactly a coherent project, but then again it's part of the job

and capacity of stars to give life to and even exalt incoherent projects. (It would be interesting to know how aware Hinckley was of the intended irony of the final scene. Surely Hollywood's capitalist genius at playing both ends against the middle extends to giving psychotic viewers exactly what their hearts desire.)

The point here isn't to parcel out blame but to consider the role of De Niro's creativity in fleshing out his character and the role of a star's screen presence in permitting certain meanings to register. A few scenes in the film—notably Bickle's meeting with Betsy in a coffee shop and his celebrated "You talkin' to me?" monologue, delivered to a mirror—grew out of De Niro's own improvisations. It's worth adding that his background as a New Yorker (Scorsese and Herrmann are also New Yorkers) undoubtedly enhanced the verisimilitude of Schrader's script.

It should be stressed that Schrader's script—a grim, confused reflection of his strict upbringing as a Dutch Calvinist in Grand Rapids, Michigan; he was forbidden to see any movies before he was seventeen—is a twisted self-portrait that sorely needs the realistic inflections and star power furnished by De Niro and the seductive fantasy elements conjured up by Herrmann (emotional) and Scorsese (visual). Without their contributions the story of *Taxi Driver* would be deficient in conviction and overall appeal, for a surprising number of details are implausible from the outset.

In the opening scene, for instance, when Bickle applies for a job as a taxi driver, his jokey, smiling response to the query "How's your driving record?" is "Clean, real clean—like my conscience"; this provokes an extended tirade from his potential employer (beginning "You gonna break my chops?") that seems unmotivated and unbelievable—except, perhaps, as an indication of Bickle's status as a pariah. The fact that Bickle keeps a diary—one of the details of Bresson films that Schrader emulates—is necessary to the movie's structure and to De Niro's offscreen narration, but it's never very plausible. (Schrader went to the trouble of using the diary of another would-be political assassin—Arthur Bremer, who attempted to kill George Wallace—as a model, but the cosmic differences between Bremer and a charming figure like De Niro are simply glided over.) And the fact that, as far as we can tell, Palatine is a political candidate without a program, without a discernible ideology—rather like the unseen Hal Phillips Walker in Robert Altman's *Nashville*—may also fit Schrader's conception, but it's hardly a convincing profile.

We also have to consider that some crucial aspects of Schrader's script were jettisoned at the outset. In the mid-70s he said, "Long ago Pauline Kael asked me why I wrote about this character, what it had to do with me. I said, 'It is me without any brains.'" More recently, in the book *Schrader on Schrader* (1990), he said, "At the time I wrote [the script] I was very enamored of guns, I was very

suicidal, I was drinking heavily, I was obsessed with pornography in the way a lonely person is, and all those elements are upfront in the script. Obviously some aspects are heightened—the racism of the character, the sexism. . . . In fact, in the draft of the script that I sold, at the end all the people he kills are black. [Scorsese and the producers] and everyone said, no, we just can't do this, it's an incitement to riot; but it was true to the character."

One obvious consequence was that racist remarks were transferred to other white characters. (One of these characters is played by Scorsese himself—a lunatic passenger of Bickle's who makes Bickle seem like a model of sanity, though it's this customer's ecstatic evocation of "what a .44 magnum" can do to a woman's face and "pussy" that apparently inspires Bickle to buy the same handgun.) The transference of Bickle's racism (via script changes) and the rationalizing of his sexism (via the romantic score) force these elements into the very poetics of the movie's vision instead of leaving them as isolated elements in the psychosis of an individual character. This is where the uncommon talents of Scorsese come in—as an aesthetic catalyst.

For critic Robin Wood, writing in his 1986 book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, the ultimate incoherence of *Taxi Driver* can be traced to "a relatively clear-cut conflict of auteurs," though for him there are only two—the Catholic Scorsese and the Protestant Schrader. For Wood "The [political] position implicit in Paul Schrader's work . . . can be quite simply characterized as quasi-Fascist," especially if one factors in his scripts for other directors.

Wood cites "the putdown of unionization" (*Blue Collar*), "the putdown of feminism 'in the Name of the Father'" (*Old Boyfriends*), "the denunciation of alternatives to the Family by defining them in terms of degeneracy and pornography" (*Hardcore*), "the implicit denigration of gays" (*American Gigolo*), and "the glorification of the dehumanized hero as efficient killing-machine (unambiguous in *Rolling Thunder*, confused—I believe by Scorsese's presence as director—in *Taxi Driver*)." To this list one could add later examples, such as the exploitation of sexual disgust in Schrader's remake of *Cat People*, the direct celebration of Japanese fascism in *Mishima*, the trashing of radical politics in *Patty Hearst* (which he directed but didn't write), and, reportedly, the flip trivializing of Hollywood blacklisting in his recent made-for-cable *Witch Hunt* (which turns the anticommunist witch-hunts into events involving actual witches).

Of course, according to the world of infotainment and most film reviewing, Schrader's films, *Taxi Driver* included, are devoid of politics (Hey, folks, they're just good, clean entertainment, massacres and all). But it must be admitted that Schrader—an intellectual and a former film critic of some distinction—doesn't appear to make this error himself. (There's even a scene in *Taxi Driver*—one of many bull sessions among Bickle's fellow cabbies—that can be said to make fun

of homophobia: a driver earnestly insists that every time a gay couple in San Francisco splits up one partner is required by law to pay the other one alimony.)

I think one has to say that the politics of *Taxi Driver* are confused rather than fascistic in any ordinary sense—opportunistically confused, to be sure, but not the simple call to violence that inspired Dave Kehr to call the movie "a thinking man's *Death Wish*." Consider the self-deluding naïveté of Schrader's declaration in *Film Comment* twenty years ago: "The controversial nature of the film will stem, I think, from the fact that Travis cannot be tolerated. The film tries to make a hard distinction for many people to perceive: the difference between understanding someone and tolerating him. He is to be understood, but not tolerated. I believe in capital punishment: he should be killed." Maybe he should; but *Taxi Driver* doesn't convict Bickle or even place him on trial. After killing everyone in sight at a whorehouse, in a massacre clearly intended to make us think of My Lai, he's declared a hero by everyone in the movie who's still alive—even Iris's father profusely thanks him in a letter that's read offscreen. One wonders, if Bickle had been arrested instead of applauded, would the movie be remembered today as a timeless classic? For surely part of its achievement is to impart lyricism, poetry, and warmth to sentiments usually associated with genocide, validating Bickle's murderous rage as much as criticizing it. Within these terms, "irony" becomes a convenient escape clause for the filmmakers—though it's highly doubtful that if Bickle himself saw *Taxi Driver* he'd be inclined to read the ending as anything but straight.

Here's another quotation from Patterson and Farber: "*Taxi Driver* is always asserting the power of playing both sides of the boxoffice dollar: obeisance to the boxoffice provens, such as concluding on a ten-minute massacre, a sex motive, good-guys vs. bad-guys violence, and casting the obviously charismatic De Niro to play a psychotic, racist nobody. . . . On the other coin side, it's ravishing the auteur box of 60s best scenes, from Hitchcock's reverse track down a staircase from the *Frenzy* brutality, through Godard's handwriting gig flashed across the entire screen, to several Mike Snow inventions (the slow *Wavelength* zoom into a close look at the graphics pinned on a beaten plaster wall, and the reprise of double and triple exposures that ends *Back and Forth*). . . . *Taxi Driver* is actually a Tale of Two Cities: the old Hollywood and the new Paris of Bresson-Rivette-Godard."

Early in the same essay Patterson and Farber note "the jamming of styles: Fritz Lang expressionism, Bresson's distanced realism, and [Roger] Corman's low-budget horrifics" before going on to note specific echoes of scenes from other sources: "De Niro's cab almost collides with the two child-whores—just as Janet Leigh's fearful *Psycho* thief nearly overruns the man from whom she's stolen a bundle. . . . When De Niro stares at his Alka Seltzer glass, there is a tiny sneak zoom into the bubbling water, which adds one more shot to Godard's rapidly-

spoken philosophizing in [*Two or Three Things I Know About Her*] in which the camera frames the coffee cup from above." And Pauline Kael has described a scene where the camera moves away from Bickle on a pay phone to an empty hallway as "an Antonioni pirouette."

These are of course only a few sources of the film. I've already mentioned Schrader's well-advertised indebtedness to Bresson, especially *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Pickpocket*. Schrader has also said, "Before I sat down to write *Taxi Driver*, I reread Sartre's *Nausea*, because I saw the script as an attempt to take the European existential hero . . . and put him in an American context. In so doing, you find that he becomes more ignorant, ignorant of the nature of his problem." Schrader has also described in detail how many aspects of the plot are suggested by Ford's *The Searchers*, with Bickle serving as an updated version of John Wayne's Ethan Edwards and Keitel's pimp standing in for Scar, the Comanche warrior who kidnaps Debbie (Natalie Wood).

The incompatibility of these and other influences tends to be overcome by an overall homogenizing process that entails converting concepts from various social artists and thinkers into the private alienation of a single individual who turns out to be a charismatic mass murderer. If we recall some of De Niro's goofy, demented grins in this picture, including those that provoke complicitous audience laughter, it wouldn't be far-fetched to suggest that *Taxi Driver* takes a first step toward the mainstream gallows humor that will peak in Hannibal Lecter's lewd winks in *The Silence of the Lambs*. More important, the power of expressionism to turn the torments of a single consciousness into a highly stylized landscape, a universe of pain, makes this movie an oddly ravishing treatment of mental unbalance: Edvard Munch meets George Gershwin.

In short, thanks to what can only be termed the transformation of *Taxi Driver*'s experimental and European elements into razzle-dazzle Hollywood effects, the spectator is invited to identify with a violently Calvinist, racist, sexist, and apocalyptic fantasy, complete with extended bloodbath, that's given all the allure of glittering expressionist art and involves very few moral consequences for most members of the audience. Because the whole thing takes place inside one glamorous character's head, the social ramifications are effectively rationalized to the point of nonexistence. It must be added that the gorgeous and extremely varied visual effects Scorsese and cinematographer Michael Chapman derive from a yellow cab moving through "hellish" New York traffic are as central to the film's impact as its celebration of psychosis. Indeed, the two projects become intimately intertwined, impossible to distinguish.

—*Chicago Reader*, March 1, 1996

Meat, John, Dough

Pretty Woman

Having missed *Pretty Woman* when it opened more than three months ago, I figured I would just let it pass, but ultimately curiosity got the better of me. I'm not a big fan of either Richard Gere or Julia Roberts, but finally I had to see for myself how an R-rated movie that seemed to celebrate prostitution (at the same time it trashes prostitutes)—brought to us by the Disney Studio, the same people responsible for such squeaky-clean family entertainments as *Dick Tracy* and the rerelease of *The Jungle Book*—could become one of the biggest hits of the year.

Now that I've seen it, I still think *Pretty Woman* celebrates prostitution while trashing real-life prostitutes, but not in the way that I originally imagined, and not in a way that is readily apparent. In fact, the film manages to espouse prostitution while cleverly concealing the fact that it is doing so. In keeping with the hallowed Disney tradition, *Pretty Woman* is a fairy tale and a paean to big business; it also happens to be a guarded defense of prostitution—an ideological sleight of hand that earns it an R rating but also makes it a fairy tale as fanciful and pie-eyed as the famous Disney cartoons (*Cinderella* in particular).

Edward Lewis (Richard Gere), an emotionally stunted multimillionaire from New York, is in Los Angeles on business. Leaving a party, he asks directions from Vivian (Julia Roberts), a street hooker, and winds up booking her for the night. Advised by his lawyer (Jason Alexander) that a female companion would come in handy for his social/business engagements, and charmed by Vivian's beauty and directness, he proposes to rent her for the week, and they negotiate a fee—$3,000 plus clothing and meals.

Vivian, still dressed in her gaudy hooker clothes, is snubbed and humiliated in a Rodeo Drive boutique, but then enlists the assistance of a hotel manager (Hector Elizondo) and later Edward himself in purchasing her wardrobe for the week. Edward, meanwhile, in the course of planning the takeover of a shipbuilding company, reveals to Vivian that his estrangement from his recently deceased father is behind both his corporate ruthlessness and his emotional blockage. Thanks to Vivian, however, who gradually falls in love with him, he begins to become more human, and, without his lawyer's knowledge, works out a friendly merger between himself and the shipbuilder (Ralph Bellamy).

He wants to set Vivian up as his mistress in New York, but she refuses, explain-

ing that he's still treating her like a prostitute, and recounts her highly original childhood fantasy of being rescued from a tower by a knight in shining armor. But when he turns up later with a bouquet of flowers at her apartment—just as she's leaving to start a new life in San Francisco—and climbs the fire escape to her window to "rescue" her, she agrees to "rescue him right back."

For this plot to work as a romantic comedy, the institutions represented by Edward and Vivian, big business and prostitution, both have to be given a careful dry cleaning—above all they must be treated as separate rather than interlocking activities, unrelated businesses that could benefit from a "merger." Thus, according to this movie's assumptions, hookers like Vivian and her roommate Kit (Laura San Giacomo) are by definition poorly educated but otherwise reasonably happy independent contractors who willingly chose their profession and work without pimps, bosses, or syndicates—and therefore have nothing whatsoever to do with big business in any shape or form.

By the same token, a ruthless corporate mogul like Edward is basically OK—even sensitive: he plays classical piano, attends the opera, and reads aloud from Shakespeare to the semiliterate Vivian, who never finished high school. (By contrast, Edward went "all the way" in his own education.) He's only become destructive and emotionally crippled because he couldn't hit it off with his old man (a banker and one of the first of his corporate victims); as soon as he decides to "build things" with the shipbuilder instead of take over his company and sell it off in pieces, he's clearly on the right track. It doesn't matter in the slightest whether these "things" happen to be, say, nuclear submarines or aircraft carriers—as well they might be, since the company has Navy contracts. The only important issue is mending the rift between Edward and this new father figure so Edward can receive his approval ("I'm proud of you"), never mind for what.

The movie skims off the most appealing aspects of both Edward and Vivian, asks us to identify with them, and encourages us to ignore the rest, so that we never get any sustained opportunity to reflect on Edward as a supporter of prostitution or Vivian as an economic victim of his whims without a shred of equality. (The movie is careful to show during their first encounter that she knows more than he does about how to drive a Porsche, and later, when she feels insulted, has her stomp out of the penthouse leaving the money behind—both scenes apparently intended to relax the feminists in the audience.) To make sure we're coaxed into a proper frame of mind, the movie even provides us with an elevator boy, a stock comic figure whose hammy grimaces tell us how we're supposed to react to certain scenes.

The movie is quite explicit about Edward and Vivian having somewhat related professions ("You and I are such similar creatures," he tells her; "we both screw people for money"), but much less explicit about the relationship of both of their

businesses to commodities and consumption. Considering the fact that this is basically a movie about shopping, this mystification is quite a feat. The sexual-economic pun in Edward's wisecrack points to a dualism that runs all the way through the picture. When, for instance, Edward takes Vivian into a Beverly Hills boutique, he tells a clerk that he intends to spend (my italics) "an *obscene* amount of money," and therefore they need "some major *sucking up*"—two phrases that seemed to provoke audible surges of sexual excitement in the audience.

In many respects, though, the movie's real focus is neither sex nor money per se but the awe and class anxiety experienced by Vivian when she moves off the street and into Edward's hotel, the Regent Beverly Wilshire—awe and anxiety the audience clearly shares. Like her, we're expected to say "Wow" when we enter the hotel lobby, and when we enter Edward's sumptuous penthouse suite, we're supposed to be too amazed even for words. Champagne served with strawberries, a montage of Rodeo Drive shop signs and window displays, a fancy restaurant, a flight in a private plane to San Francisco to attend the opera are all meant to evoke a hushed, almost religious response, as well as nervousness about behaving the "wrong way" in relation to such holy privileges—as Vivian often does, providing most of the film's laughs. Gulping the champagne too quickly before getting to the strawberries, being humiliated and then later taking her revenge in the Rodeo Drive boutiques, causing an accident with the restaurant silverware, and responding to the opera by saying, "It's so good I almost peed in my pants" (which Edward translates to a nearby dowager as, "She said she liked it almost as much as *The Pirates of Penzance*"): these moments provide frissons roughly equivalent to the one when Woody Allen sneezed into a heap of cocaine in *Annie Hall*. That is, they cater both to the audience's voyeuristic interest in opulence and to a nervousness about behaving "correctly" in the presence of such conspicuous consumption.

Edward's behavior, of course, is supposed to be tasteful and refined, not conspicuous and vulgar. Unlike Vivian's roommate, you'd never catch him taking drugs, and in fact he's all ready to eject Vivian from his penthouse when he (wrongly) suspects her of it. Although he's afraid of heights—a symbolic touch that's clearly related to his patriarchal hang-up—he explains to Vivian that he took the penthouse suite because it's the "best," just as he books box seats at the opera because they're the "best." What the "best" really means, of course, is the most conspicuous (box seats have notoriously poor sight lines), but it's part of the basic lie of this movie that extreme wealth automatically grants you the best that life, including culture, has to offer. (The "best" is also represented by Edward's hardcover edition of Shakespeare quotations—rather than, say, paperback editions of individual Shakespeare plays, which Vivian could presumably afford to buy and read on her own, without her sugar daddy's beneficence.)

According to this movie's value system, Edward's wealth and Vivian's vulgarity are so distinct and separate that they form a sexual dialectic, a winning combination. (The movie's casting works hand in glove with this idea, contrasting Gere's smug self-satisfaction with Roberts's outgoing openness.) One of the ways that they're distinct and separate is through the narrative functions of a couple of secondary characters, both middlemen designed to keep Edward pure and spotless—Edward's lawyer and the hotel manager. The lawyer, a longtime friend and associate of Edward's, becomes a villain when he discovers Vivian is a hooker and proceeds to "treat her like one" (with leering contempt and attempted rape); the manager treats her like a hooker then becomes her ally once her relationship to Edward is clearly established.

In both cases, it's Vivian's relationship with Edward and his money that sanctifies her, and her profession that degrades her—while Edward remains relatively untarnished even during his transactions with her. A marriage proposal is implied without being stated in the final clinch, and an earlier line of dialogue suggests that prostitution plus "love" equals therapy at bargain rates. Either way, the overall implication appears to be that as long as Edward's money is clean—validated by high culture and the shipbuilder—a long-term lease is no longer prostitution but the happy ending of a fairy tale. Conceivably, even Uncle Walt would have approved.

—*Chicago Reader,* July 13, 1990

Tashlinesque

> According to Georges Sadoul, Frank Tashlin is a second-rank director because he has never done a remake of *You Can't Take It with You* or *The Awful Truth*. According to me, my colleague errs in mistaking a closed door for an open one. In fifteen years' time, people will realize that *The Girl Can't Help It* served then—that is, today—as a fountain of youth from which the cinema now—that is, in the future—has drawn fresh inspiration. . . . To sum up, Frank Tashlin has not renovated the Hollywood comedy. He has done better. There is not a difference in degree between *Hollywood or Bust* and *It Happened One Night*, between *The Girl Can't Help It* and *Design for Living*, but a difference in kind. Tashlin, in other words, has not renewed but created. And henceforth, when you talk about a comedy, don't say "It's Chaplinesque"; say, loud and clear, "It's Tashlinesque."

Jean-Luc Godard's review of *Hollywood or Bust* in the July 1957 issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* is founded on a frank prophecy, only a small part of which has come true. In 1972, not many people realized the degree to which *The Girl Can't Help It* influenced the modern cinema and not only Godard; and in 1994, alas, even fewer respond to the name Tashlin, much less "Tashlinesque." Thus the fact that the adjective meant and continues to mean something at once specific and multifaceted requires some explication—including an explanation of why such a definition becomes necessary.

I'm speaking here not only of the contemporary memory-hole into which most film history has disappeared—the amnesia that requires an explanation for many younger viewers of what, say, "Godardian" means—but of a historical breach of faith that took place in the 70s, when Godard's prophecy was meant to be fulfilled. Why it wasn't fulfilled, despite a ratification of Godard's 1957 prediction in many of his own films of the 1960s—such as references to cartoons in *Band of Outsiders* and *Made in USA*, the vending machine in *Alphaville*, and the cocktail party (color filters and all) in *Pierrot le fou*, not to mention the washing machine in Bertolucci's *Partner*—can be attributed to several interlocking failures and resistances:

1. The development by Jerry Lewis of a writing and directing style both derived from and distinct from Tashlin's (in its relative freedom from topical

satire and its greater reliance on nonsense), beginning with *The Bellboy* in 1960, that subsequently confused the matter of who Tashlin was and what "Tashlinesque" meant for spectators and critics on both sides of the Atlantic.

2. A decrease in the relative impact, energy, and satirical inflection of Tashlin's work, which arguably started around the same time.

3. A critical resistance to Tashlin in both England and the U.S., usually coupled with resistance to Lewis as well, and often accompanied by a preference for the more conservative and conformist wit of Blake Edwards. Indeed, by the late 70s, when a certain Francophobia had overtaken much of Anglo-American film criticism—during the same period when the New German Cinema had come to replace the French New Wave as the vanguard art cinema movement—a good many commentators who wished to disparage French film taste merely had to evoke French enthusiasm for Lewis in order to score points; on this level of pseudodiscussion, making any distinction between Lewis and his mentor was hair-splitting for anyone but specialists.

4. By the late 70s, the ascent of a more verbal and literary style of American comedy as represented by Woody Allen and Mel Brooks that made Tashlin even less fashionable.

This is not to suggest that over the thirty-seven years since Godard's prophecy the term "Tashlinesque" was not used—only that the use of such a term became increasingly esoteric. To cite two examples from my own experience: at a 1972 press conference in Cannes held by Jerzy Skolimowski after the screening of his *King, Queen, Knave*—a free-wheeling adaptation of Nabokov that I had liked and most of my colleagues had detested—I asked him what kind of importance Frank Tashlin (who had died in Hollywood only a few days before) had for him, noting the presence of what I believed to be a Tashlinesque style in his film. Skolimowski's reply was that he wasn't sure he knew who Tashlin was, but if his intuition was correct, he didn't take my comparison as a compliment.

I committed a similar faux pas the following year in a less public forum, while working on a translation of a film treatment by William Klein. I remarked to Klein that his 1968 feature *Mr. Freedom* struck me as Tashlinesque. In this case, Klein was fully aware of who Tashlin was; *Artists and Models* had recently been rereleased in Paris, and Klein noted with amusement having seen Jacques Rivette first in line in front of a cinema where it was opening, "as if it were *Potemkin*"—but he, too, didn't regard my intended tribute favorably.

What did I mean when I called these two otherwise very different films Tashlinesque? In both cases, I was thinking about a deliberately dehumanized form of expressionism in the cartoonlike demeanor of the major characters that had bitter satirical overtones, the loud primary colors that also suggested cartoons and

comic books, and a spirited vulgarity that comprised a kind of bittersweet response to infantile American energies run amok. In the case of *King, Queen, Knave*, I was thinking of the hysterical adolescent sexuality of John Moulder Brown, the hero—comparable to that of Lewis—as unleashed by Gina Lollobrigida, who played his stepmother, and whose sexual glamour—comparable to that of Jayne Mansfield—was equally hyperbolic. In the case of *Mr. Freedom*, the cartoon styling was somewhat attenuated by other devices suggesting puppet theater and the satire was clearly agitprop, but the comic exaggerations and pop iconography assigned to actors, costumes, and settings seemed to stem from a related impulse. In both films, moreover, a deliberate and disturbing confusion between human and android came to the fore in the final shots—a life-size Gina Lollobrigida doll produced at the end of *King, Queen, Knave*; the eponymous hero of *Mr. Freedom* revealed as a broken robot at the end of Klein's film—that literalized certain implications of Tashlin's style in a way that gave additional political and ideological weight to his caricatures, without the mitigating Hollywood-style humanism that invariably crept into his own features. In both cases, it appeared to me that the cruelty of the satire was above all a *reading* of Tashlin, a forcing to the surface of certain implications that in Tashlin's comedies had figured mainly as dark and latent possibilities.

In order for me to have made this comparison, however, a certain abstract leap of faith was necessary, and one that ignored the immense ideological, social, and practical breach between Hollywood and art cinema. This was a leap that Godard's filmmaking in the 60s had already taken—a utopian form of appropriation and inclusion that declared that cinema was cinema, that Preminger and Mizoguchi, Cukor and Bergman, or Tashlin and Skolimowski could sit at the same table in a Godard film and freely converse on an equal footing. It was much the same impulse, in a way, that suggested that Marxist-Leninists, Maoists, and ordinary factory workers could all arrive at the same conclusions, in the same language.

It is said that the inability of many to make this leap was—and is—a matter of taste: the key term used against Tashlin and factory workers alike is "vulgarity," and class implications may be equally operative in both usages. If Raymond Durgnat could in 1969 spot the same "mixture of despair and acquiescence" in both Tashlin and Warhol, most of his Anglo-American contemporaries were too busy segregating the two into the mutually exclusive categories of entertainment and art to ponder the salient parallels. Thus the "coldness," distanciation, and ironic playfulness that critics cited in defense of Warhol's sophistication as a dandy and artist were all regarded as negative factors in relation to Tashlin—proof even of his alleged corruption as an entertainer. While Warhol was declared an acute social analyst who perfectly understood the art market (the class to which

he catered), Tashlin was branded as a man with a breast fixation who was too implicated in what he was satirizing to qualify as a serious artist. Different strokes for different folks—and most of the people whom Tashlin addressed didn't read auteurist criticism.

In short, it seems to me that "Tashlinesque" can refer to five different strains in the contemporary cinema, if "contemporary" is stretched to include everything over the past half century:

A. *Graphic expression in shapes, colors, costumes, settings, and facial expressions derived from both animated and still cartoons and comic books.* The most Tashlinesque Tashlin film in this respect is probably *Artists and Models.* Some of the most notable examples by other directors include Rowland's *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T* (1953), Frank's *Li'l Abner* (1959), Losey's *Modesty Blaise* (1966), Jessua's *Jeu de massacre* (1967), Resnais's *I Want to Go Home* (1989), Beatty's *Dick Tracy* (1990), and Lee Myung-sei's Korean comedy *My Love, My Bride* (1991).

B. *Sexual hysteria—usually (if not invariably) grounded in the combination of male adolescent lust and 50s notions of feminine voluptuousness.* Examples in the work of others include Wilder's *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), Sidney's *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963) (one of the few depictions of female adolescent lust), Lewis's *The Nutty Professor* (1963), Donner's *What's New Pussycat?* (1965), Allen's *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966), Axelrod's *Lord Love a Duck* (1966), and Reiner's *The Man with Two Brains* (1983).

C. *Vulgar modernism.* This term, usefully investigated by J. Hoberman in a 1982 essay, is described as a "popular, ironic, somewhat dehumanized mode reflexively concerned with the specific properties of its medium or the conditions of its making." It seems appropriate that Tashlin's first solo feature, aptly titled *The First Time,* should open explicitly under the sign of *Tristram Shandy*—arguably one of the earliest avatars of vulgar modernism—with the narrator describing the physical and emotional state of his parents prior to his own birth, that is, the conditions of his own making. Hoberman cites eight other Tashlin features as examples, as well as several Tex Avery cartoons, Chuck Jones's 1953 *Duck Amuck,* and some of Tashlin's own early animation. Live action examples by others would include Potter's *Hellzapoppin'* (1941), Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), Lewis's *The Patsy* (1964), Quine's *Paris When It Sizzles* (1964), Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974), Albert Brooks's *Real Life* (1979) and *Modern Romance* (1981), and Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985).

D. *Intertextual film references.* Properly speaking this could be subsumed under C, but the plethora of such references in Tashlin's cinema suggests that it deserves a special category of its own. Examples: Walker's *Road to Bali* (1952), Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960), Malle's *Zazie dans le métro* (1960), all of

Godard's features before 1968, Ross's *Play It Again, Sam* (1972), Rivette's *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974), Mel Brooks's *Spaceballs* (1987), and Zemeckis's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988).

E. *Contemporary social satire: products, gadgets, fads, trends.* Perhaps the richest and most neglected vein of the Tashlinesque. Examples: Sturges's *Christmas in July* (1940), Chaplin's *A King in New York* (1957), Tati's *Mon oncle* (1958), Renoir's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1959), Marc O's *Les idoles* (1968), Itami's *Tampopo* (1986), and Clifton Ko's Hong Kong comedy *Mr. Coconut* (1989).

More than any other, this latter category accounts for what continues to keep "Tashlinesque" a radical term: the capacity to aestheticize while ridiculing the giddy excesses of consumer culture, from rock and roll to groceries to comic books to Marilyn Monroe. While Godard and Warhol made this process more self-conscious, Tashlin clearly plowed the field that they went on to cultivate. Broadly speaking, the uses of French rock music in *Une femme mariée*, teenage publicity in *Masculin féminin*, movie lobby displays in *Made in USA*, detergent boxes as high-rises in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, and little red books as décor in *La Chinoise* are as brazenly Tashlinesque in their intricate love-hatreds as the Tashlin lampoons of Monroe via Jayne Mansfield, Sheree North, and Tuesday Weld—stylizations that cleared the way for both the various "Marilyn" paintings of Warhol and, much later, many of the music videos of Madonna. In this respect at least, Godard's prophecy may have been more correct than he knew.

Appendix: Two Reviews

Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?

Clearly Tashlin's most avant-garde feature, and probably his most political, thus one of his most misunderstood. Retaining the title, Jayne Mansfield, and advertising milieu from George Axelrod's Broadway play, but reportedly little else, Tashlin mounts a thoughtful and multifaceted polemic against the success ethic itself. (A key line: "Success will fit you like a shroud.") The consequences are dazzling for his art but disastrous for his career. Made at Fox on the heels of *The Girl Can't Help It*, the film provides a textbook illustration of George S. Kaufman's maxim, "Satire is what closes in New Haven." Fortunately, before the balance sheets are counted, 50s America receives one of its two most devastating caricatures on film; the other is Chaplin's *A King in New York*, made the same year. Paraphrasing Rossellini, both are the films of free men; fully anticipating Godard's journalistic directive that you can—and must—place everything in a film, both filmmakers hit on nightmarishly topical New York dystopias set in the present, where, thanks to TV and advertising (rightly perceived as synonymous), the divisions between public and private are now fully obliterated.

"One can approve vulgarity in theory as a comment on vulgarity," wrote Andrew

Sarris, "but in practice all vulgarity is inseparable. . . . To ridicule Jayne Mansfield's enormous bust in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* may be construed as satire, but to ridicule Betsy Drake's small bust in the same film is simply unabashed vulgarity." Neither bust is in fact ridiculed—it's the breast worship engulfing and oppressing both women that Tashlin mocks—but much as Chaplin's treatment of plastic surgery (rather than plastic surgery itself) was declared tasteless, Tashlin's most daring forms of irreverence were sometimes mistaken for exploitation. (As Diane Johnson notes, "In the 1950s there were fewer words for oppression.") And given the intolerant climate of the period, which made Tashlin a disreputable blood brother of Spike Jones and Harvey Kurtzman, some of his other satirical targets were equally sacred; to start out by devaluing the Fox logo was almost like spitting on the flag. (In order to signal his necessary implication in the same ad culture he derides, and perhaps also to placate his skeptical bosses, Tashlin takes care to inject blatant plugs for no less than seven recent or upcoming Fox releases, as well as several Fox actors.)

This lighthearted jeremiad correctly and prophetically perceives that advertising not merely competes with contemporary culture; it *is* contemporary culture. A corollary perception, which this picture spells out in numerous ways: that television, far from facilitating communication and social interaction, effectively replaces it. Significantly, when the title hero (Tony Randall), an ad writer, wants to discover what happened to his niece, or even wishes to know what Rita Marlowe (Jayne Mansfield) is saying downstairs, directly below his flat, he turns on his TV set.

No other CinemaScope film of the 50s is so completely haunted by the specter of television. Commercials start even during the credits, an entr'acte is introduced by Randall for the sake of TV fans in withdrawal (the screen size obligingly shrinks and shifts to black and white), and the plot's absurdist climax occurs when, on a TV special, Groucho Marx in his TV quiz-show persona—an almost literal deus ex machina—makes a surprise guest appearance, turning out to be Marlowe's long-lost love. When the smoke clears, the hero—at this point the president of his ad agency—has reverted to blissful ordinariness and become a chicken farmer.

Rock-a-Bye Baby

If this is as much of a remake of *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*—apart from a few stray gags and ideas—as some critics imply, it's significant that for Brian Henderson, Jerry Lewis takes over Eddie Bracken's role, while for Andrew Sarris, he replaces Betty Hutton. Either way, this is the first Lewis-without-Martin feature directed by Tashlin, and its characteristic narrative discontinuity at the beginning forms an interesting auteurist continuity with Tashlin's previous feature, made without Lewis for a different studio. *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* ends with the characters suddenly removed from their naturalistic environment and placed in front of a stage curtain; *Rock-a-Bye Baby* begins behind its credits with Lewis in front of a stage curtain, assuming his brassy nightclub persona as he belts out a version of the film's theme song—then continues as he moves through a series of studio soundstage locations. Confusingly, the ensuing story's show-biz character is not Lewis but Marilyn Maxwell, and the opening scene, set on a studio lot, involves Maxwell but not Lewis.

Stranger still, Lewis's character in the film, Clayton Poole—a childhood sweetheart

and still-devoted fan of Maxwell, working as a TV repairman in the small Indiana town where they both grew up—is later shown humming the same theme song while he pins up diapers on a clothesline. This implies a continuity of discourse beyond the discontinuity of characters and settings that seems entirely characteristic of Tashlin's modernist approach to storytelling. (Comparing Tashlin with both Sturges and Godard, Henderson has some fascinating observations to make about narrative ellipsis in this film.) This was Lewis's third feature without Martin, made at a time when he was still defining his new persona—which probably accounts for the discrepancy between the onstage Lewis and Lewis-as-Poole, as well as the somewhat contradictory treatment of Poole's libido. (When Maxwell rhetorically asks Poole, "How can I ask you to be the father of my children?" his response is adolescent terror, a series of hysterical double-takes; yet much later, in the same setting, when he suddenly recalls he's married to Maxwell's kid sister—Connie Stevens—he cackles with maniacal glee over the prospect of their having sex.)

This is clearly a film whose authorship is shared by Tashlin and Lewis, the latter serving as producer (for the second time in his career, after *The Delicate Delinquent*). Robert Benayoun also credits Lewis as cowriter and suggests that while the film's satiric aspects can easily be attributed to Tashlin ("notably whatever involves Hollywood and *The Virgin of the Nile*, as well as the sublime character of Miss Bessie, the perpetual victim of TV commercials"), the character of Poole and his ambition to become a "perfect mother" seem more the work of Lewis, as do other personal touches (such as Lewis's son Gary playing Poole as a child).

In other words, it's a collaboration. While one might further guess that most of the film's many references to TV come from Tashlin, the most extended sequence relating to TV has Lewis behind the shell of an empty TV set running through an anthology of past and future Lewis impersonations—a country-western cowboy, an "Uncle Raul" comprising an early draft of Nutty Professor Julius Kelp, a version of Eddie Mayehoff harking back to *That's My Boy*, an Italian opera singer, and the buck-toothed Japanese that would sustain him over subsequent decades. By contrast, the brilliant early sequence with a runaway fire hose seems purest Tashlin, all the way down to the Tashlinesque white poodle.

—*Frank Tashlin*, edited by Roger Garcia (Éditions du Festival international du film de Locarno in collaboration with the British Film Institute [London] / Éditions Yellow Now [Crisnée, Belgium], 1994)

Weird and Wonderful

Takeshi Kitano's *Kikujiro*

I'm finally starting to understand Takeshi Kitano's movies, though given that his specialty seems to be a mixture of violence, slapstick, and sentimentality, I'm not sure I'll ever be a convert. Still, I found *Kikujiro* (1999), his eighth feature, much more affecting than the other three features I've seen.

One of the fascinating things about *Kikujiro*, which has virtually no violence, is that it seems both more mainstream and more experimental in form than the other Kitano movies I've seen. It changes style so often that it all but eliminates narrative. It's divided into sections like a photo album, with photos and captions doubling as chapter headings. It has intricately choreographed expressionist dream sequences, extended gags in extreme long shot that all but convert the main characters into balls ricocheting through pinball machines, and absurd physical gags in medium shot (as when the hero tries to swim) that take the form of frozen tableaux and provoke blank stares from other characters. It's full of strange flights of fancy that come out of nowhere and go nowhere. And along with the laughs, it creates a sense of loss so strong and grievous that this feeling may stick with you for days. Yes, it's sentimental, but it's also highly atypical and downright weird. And it's been haunting me ever since I saw it a year ago at the Locarno Film Festival.

A statement by the writer-director-editor-star suggests that it's supposed to be and do all of the above: "After *Fireworks*, I couldn't help feeling that my films were being stereotyped: 'gangster, violence, life and death.' It became difficult for me to identify with them. So I decided to try and make a film no one would expect from me. To tell the truth, the story of this film belongs to a genre which is outside my specialty. But I decided to make this film because it would be a challenge for me to cope with this ordinary story and try to make it my very own through my direction, and I tried a lot of experiments with imagery. I think it ended up being a very strange film with my trademark all over it. I hope to continue upsetting people's expectations in a positive way."

Generic expectations aside, Kitano's reputation in Japan is based on far more than what he's done as a film director. As a comic performer, he's been around for a quarter of a century, having started out as half of a comic duo known as the Two Beats (playing Beat Takeshi—a stage name he still uses as an actor—alongside

Beat Kiyoshi). He evolved into a TV personality in the early 80s and in recent years has been appearing weekly on no less than eight or nine programs, which range from sitcoms to game shows. He didn't begin directing until 1989. (When I was in Tokyo last December, it took only a bit of channel surfing to find him.) Somewhat abrasive and even abusive in manner, he probably shares as many traits with Groucho Marx as he does with Buster Keaton, and poker-faced impassivity has also long been part of his style and persona—something that's only emphasized by the paralysis in portions of his face, a consequence of a traffic accident several years ago.

I rarely find Kitano as funny as I think I'm supposed to, which makes me wonder if this is because of cultural differences in how we relate to tragedy and comedy. At Locarno last summer, I saw two recent documentary features about him. One of them, Makoto Shinozaki's *Jam Session*—a standard "making of" promo about *Kikujiro*, created by Kitano's production company—was little more than advertising. The other, Jean-Pierre Limosin's *Takeshi Kitano the Unforeseeable* (made for French TV), was helped immeasurably by a sensitive interview conducted by film critic (and at the time president of Tokyo University) Shigehiko Hasumi, who implicitly treats Kitano as a tragic figure.

French filmmaker Chris Marker recently observed that it rains equally often in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Akira Kurosawa. Are Eastern cultures and Russia more comfortable with gloom and tragedy? After all, in Japan suicide is still sometimes seen as a noble and satisfying way of concluding things—a kind of credible Dostoyevskian solution. Hasumi's approach to Kitano implies that viewing him as some sort of over-the-hill wreck may be a prerequisite for finding him funny. A sense of human wreckage is certainly apparent in *Kikujiro*, whether or not one laughs at the gags, nearly all of which are suffused with melancholy; I found myself laughing at only about half of them.

Kitano has accumulated all sorts of associations from being on Japanese TV, which obviously makes his films harder for Western viewers to read. The films are also full of personal references. For instance, his former partner Beat Kiyoshi makes a guest appearance in *Kikujiro* as a security guard at a rural bus shelter whom Kitano gratuitously berates and harasses, but I have no idea whether this scene alludes to some of their old routines. It also can't be coincidence that this movie opens and closes in the Asakusa district of Tokyo, the place where Kitano spent his own childhood and home to the two leading characters—a nine-year-old boy named Masao (Yusuke Sekiguchi) who lives with his grandmother and Kikujiro (Kitano), the husband of a friend and neighbor of the grandmother. He has even said that his father—a housepainter and maker of lacquered objects who had many financial ups and downs because he gambled—was the inspiration for the film's title character.

As I suggested earlier, the plot of *Kikujiro* is so minimal and ambiguous it verges on nonexistent. Masao, a lonely kid, has no father and has never met his mother, who works far away to support him. After he stumbles upon her picture and address, the grandmother's friend gets Kikujiro to take the boy to see his mother. Instead Kikujiro takes him to the bicycle races and gambles away all the boy's travel money, but saves him just before he's molested by a pervert. Then they hitch rides to where Masao's mother lives, meeting various people en route. Kikujiro spots the mother with another boy and reports back to Masao that she isn't there; later he hitches a ride to a nearby town and glimpses his own mother in a nursing home without approaching her. Eventually he and Masao return to Asakusa and part company.

Kikujiro is the only developed character, though his background is a bit cloudy. We know nothing about his current or past profession, though some viewers may assume he used to be a yakuza. Masao is more a figure than a character, and we find out even less about his mother. Moreover, the various friends Masao and Kikujiro make on their trip—a writer, a woman juggler, and two bikers—seem to exist only for the purpose of amusing Masao.

The Japanese title of this movie is *Kikujiro no natsu*, which means "The Summer of Kikujiro," and central to its singular handling of time is that it has a sort of aimless summerlike drift. Part of what I find so strange and affecting about it is that it goes beyond feeling like "a summer movie" and seems suspended in time, so that the picaresque events could be taking place over three or four days or just as many weeks or months—maybe even years. Kikujiro and Masao have virtually no luggage with them, but that doesn't prevent them from periodically appearing in different clothes. Furthermore, though most or all of their destinations can be found on maps of Japan and aren't that far from one another, their cross-country journey feels so mythical that they could be crossing a vast continent.

Indeed, the film feels like an epic, roughly akin to *Don Quixote* or *The Searchers*—one that's infused with a sense of futility and delusion combined with wistful yearning and persistence. The sensation of being caught in an endless loop is reinforced by the main musical theme, by Kitano regular Joe Hisaishi, a piece of treacle featuring piano and orchestra that's repeated so many times it drills its way into your skull, like one of the elevator-music themes of a comedy by Jacques Tati (or, perhaps closer to the mark, Ryuichi Sakamoto's main theme for Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, which featured Kitano's first film performance).

As for the sense of tragedy, I'm hesitant to rely too much on national typecasting. But there are passages about mothers and sons, "passive dependence," and arrested male development in Ian Buruma's provocative 1984 book about con-

temporary Japan, *Behind the Mask*, that have more to say about the emotions of mother loss in *Kikujiro* than anything I could add. One fairly sarcastic and brutal paragraph catches Buruma's overall drift: "The treatment of young children is in a way similar to that of drunks and foreigners. They are not held socially responsible for anything they do or say, for they know no shame. They must be pampered not punished. This wonderful state of grace is one good reason for foreigners to live in Japan and Japanese males to spend much of their non-working hours in a state of inebriation or even, if necessary, to fake it."

That the movie periodically grinds to a halt so that the juggler, writer, bikers, and title hero can devote their time exclusively to amusing Masao may seem like self-indulgence, but ultimately it points to a traumatic sense of mother loss that no amount of amusement can placate. An experimental feature that keeps shooting off its ideas like an endless row of skyrockets, *Kikujiro* ultimately conveys this grief with such sustained intensity that it can only leave a scorched path of devastation in its aftermath.

—*Chicago Reader*, June 30, 2000

*Corpus Callosum

I recently read in a film festival report that Michael Snow's new 92-minute feature was a bit longer than it needed to be. This conjured up visions of a test-marketing preview—cards handed out at Anthology Film Archives with questions like, "Would an ideal length for this be 82 minutes? An hour? Three minutes? 920 minutes?" For even though this may be the best Snow film since the *La région centrale* in 1971—a commemorative (and quite accessible) magnum opus with many echoes and aspects of his previous works—it enters a moviegoing climate distinctly different from the kind that greeted his earlier masterpieces. In 1969, the late, great Raymond Durgnat could find the same "mixture of despair and acquiescence" in both Frank Tashlin and Andy Warhol; today, however, avant-garde art is expected to perform like light entertainment.

Up to a point, Snow seems ready to oblige with his irrepressible jokiness—a taste for rebus-style metaphors (often banal) and adolescent pranks (a giant penis hovering over a blonde's backside) that makes this the least neurotic experimental film about technology imaginable—the precise opposite of Leslie Thornton's feature-length cycle *Peggy and Fred in Hell.* If the latter is a protracted meditation about technology as nightmare—the nightmare we're all trying to wake from (which is what James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus called "history")—**Corpus Callosum* views technology in general, and DV in particular, as an occasion for vaudeville and slapstick. Instead of Oscar Levant in *The Band Wagon* carrying both sides of a ladder, we find the same woman putting on makeup at two separate workstations during the same pan, then appearing a third time walking in the opposite direction. Even when a dollop of gay S&M gets thrown in, the spirit is no different from that of the expanding bubble-gum bubble overtaking an entire room, like The Blob.

Over four pleasurable viewings, I've sometimes found this cornucopia exhausting but always assume this to be a function strictly of my own limitations. Maybe it should be called a snow job: an encyclopedia of effects like *Rameau's Nephew . . .* (1975), with a "false alarm" ending like the one in the 1969 *Back and Forth* (with credits appearing less than two-thirds of the way through, succeeded much later by a fast rewind); a meditation on consumption as messy destruction, as in *Breakfast* (1976) and the opening section of *Presents* (1982); and an overall

day-to-night progression (as in the 1967 *Wavelength*) eventually culminating in a return to origins, the first thing Snow ever did on film—a short piece of drawn animation in 1956 of a man's leg stretching endlessly.

The title—referring to the tissue that passes messages between the brain's two hemispheres—appears in the first shot on a green door that the camera backs away from and that people pass through as Snow, offscreen, audibly calls out instructions to them (as he does throughout the film). Then the camera moves towards a surveillance TV monitor above the door, showing the same door from the same angle; a tall man and short woman pass through it, and a reverse angle finds them with the others in a waiting area, where Snow directs them to various workstations and computers. From here on, the film is mainly an almost continuous left-to-right pan across this open work space, proceeding in an apparent loop—a cityscape visible through large windows behind the computers—while DV does all sorts of things to stretch, compress, combine, and otherwise distort the human bodies within this area. The main alternative space is a living room crammed with chintzy furniture evoking 50s record-album art, and many shifting objects on the wall, where the tall man, short woman, and a boy who periodically exchange their color-coded clothes and their shapes hover around a TV on a sofa in the same sort of quasi-catatonic stupor shown by the office workers in front of their computers.

In his theorizing, Snow generally comes across like a metaphysician, shunning social meanings like the plague. Yet an interesting historical and social commentary arises from the differences between these two interior spaces: computer screens overtaking TV screens, a sleek contemporary work space that's all windows overtaking a windowless domestic interior resembling a fallout shelter where 50s kitsch either replicates itself or blows itself up. It's easy to forget Manny Farber's early perception that *Wavelength* was above all about a loft and its implied memory. This film uses camera motion, diverse sound-image combos, photochemistry, violence—the main staples of Snow's previous films, with a few of his Walking Woman icons thrown in for good measure—to tell us something about how and where we live, past and present, as well as what objectification can do to us and for us.

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Mann of the West

Q: What is the starting point for *The Naked Spur*?
A: We were in magnificent countryside—in Durango—and everything lent itself to improvisation. I never understood why almost all westerns are shot in desert landscapes! John Ford, for example, adores Monument Valley, but I know Monument Valley very well and it's not the whole west. In fact, the desert represents only one part of the American west. I wanted to show the mountains, the waterfalls, the forested areas, the snowy summits—in short to rediscover the whole Daniel Boone atmosphere: the characters emerge more fully from such an environment. In that sense the shooting of *The Naked Spur* gave me some genuine satisfaction.

—Anthony Mann in a 1967 interview

This seems to be landscape week at the Gene Siskel Film Center, with Abbas Kiarostami's sublime *Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987), Jon Jost's mesmerizing *Muri Romani* (2000), and two terrific, eye-filling Anthony Mann westerns, *The Naked Spur* (1953) and *Man of the West* (1958). There are plenty of differences between these offerings. *Muri Romani* consists of nothing but extended overlapping dissolves between various exterior walls in Rome, each one slowly merging into the next, yet it's so beautiful and absorbing I didn't feel deprived. In fact, all of these films are uncommonly beautiful objects that do more with natural settings than most films do with characters—and to risk a pun, this isn't all they do by a long shot.

All four films collapse the usual distinctions between landscape and architecture, classicism and modernity, and even at times painting and drama—though *Muri Romani* has no landscape in any ordinary sense and *The Naked Spur*, shot entirely in natural exteriors (apart from a cave where the characters find shelter from the rain), has no architecture. In contrast, *Where Is the Friend's House?* focuses for long stretches on an ancient village clinging to the side of a mountain, and *Man of the West* features a farmhouse at the bottom of a green valley and a ghost town surrounded by mountains; both movies have a kind of compositional power that's inextricably tied to their views of human behavior and human destiny.

Jean-Luc Godard wrote a review of *Man of the West* when it came out, describing "the delightful farm nestling amid the greenery which George Eliot

would have loved." If he'd written his review two years later he might have no less aptly connected the ghost town to the modernism of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura*. His view of Mann merged image and idea, classical and modern: "Just as the director of *The Birth of a Nation* gave one the impression that he was inventing the cinema with every shot, each shot of *Man of the West* gives one the impression that Anthony Mann is reinventing the western, exactly as Matisse's portraits reinvent the features of Piero della Francesca. . . . In other words, he both shows and demonstrates, innovates and copies, criticizes and creates."

Mann (1906–67) is still cherished today by aficionados of golden-age Hollywood. In the latest issue of *CineAction*, Robin Wood, perhaps the best critic of that cinema, ranks him alongside George Cukor, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Leo McCarey, Max Ophüls, Otto Preminger, Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk, and Preston Sturges—all of whom, he notes, "retain their amazing freshness and vitality today." If Mann is less known than the others it may be because his painterly gifts tend to wither on TV screens. Painter-critic Manny Farber first recognized these gifts in the late 40s and early 50s, when Mann still had the "museum space" afforded by 35-millimeter—resurrected today only in special screenings, such as the Film Center's.

The Naked Spur, the most elemental Mann western and my favorite of all his pictures, has the most breathtaking scenery, including snowcapped mountains, rock formations, and green forest clearings in the Colorado Rockies near Durango. Yet insofar as westerns are intrinsically mythological, I suppose one could argue that this one might as well be taking place inside Mann's head.

Part of the elemental lure of that western mythology today—comparable in some ways to the spell exerted by the Knights of the Round Table in England—is the excitement of an existential context in which characters forge their own personal destinies the moment they encounter or take leave of strangers. You won't catch people in a western saying "No problem" or "Have a good one" to one another as a ruse for avoiding such challenges. The role of nature in these transactions, as Mann suggests, is to make the characters "emerge more fully"; as critic Donald Phelps once put it, "The great open spaces are sectioned as methodically as a football field."

With the exception of a few nameless Blackfoot Indians killed in a brutal ambush—whom the film lamentably discounts, though the white man responsible for the ambush is no sort of hero—the film has only five characters. And because it never leaves the spectacular wilderness and everyone's traveling light, no one has a single change of wardrobe—which somehow seems fitting for a landscape film. Moreover, the four male principals, as is typical in Mann westerns, all develop dialectically: Howard Kemp (James Stewart), the bounty-hunter

hero, starts off as unpleasantly self-centered in relation to a friendly old prospector (Millard Mitchell), a dishonorably discharged yet resourceful cavalry lieutenant (Ralph Meeker), and even the cheerful outlaw (Robert Ryan) Kemp captures. Kemp becomes vulnerable when his leg is injured and bits of his tainted past are revealed (physical pain and traumatic back stories are central in Mann's westerns), and only then do the three other men begin to show their darker natures, sparking an intense psychological war (another Mann specialty). The prospector and ex-officer insist that Kemp make them his partners and split the reward for capturing the outlaw three ways, and the outlaw contrives to unravel the complacencies of all three as they travel through the wilderness toward Abilene. When the prospector, aiming his shotgun at one of the others at a critical juncture, complains, "It's gettin' so I don't know which way to point this no more," he could just as well be speaking for the audience. As usual in such a fluctuating context, the role of the woman—a feisty orphan (Janet Leigh) the outlaw has in tow—is to represent all that's left of civilization, a value that's also prone to change as loyalties and ethical profiles shift.

The settings in *Man of the West*—a western town, a train bound for Fort Worth, a farmhouse in a valley, a desert, and a ghost town (the latter two filmed in California's Red Rock Canyon)—lack the formal purity of those in *The Naked Spur.* As a result, *Man of the West* veers much closer to the grimness of Greek tragedy, its mountains and rock formations often suggesting the silent witness of an ancient amphitheater. (The connection isn't accidental; another of Mann's late interviews is peppered with references to *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone,* and one of his best early westerns is entitled *The Furies.*)

The hero, Link (Gary Cooper), is headed for Fort Worth to find a schoolteacher for his remote town, but the train is held up by a gang of thieves, stranding him with a card sharp (Arthur O'Connell) and saloon singer (Julie London). The three go to an abandoned farmhouse, where it emerges that Link used to be a member of the gang, which is led by his half-mad uncle, Dock (Lee J. Cobb); Dock raised him until he ran away in disgust and started a new life. A "link" between the civilization ironically represented by the card sharp and the singer (as well as his offscreen family) and the lawlessness of the gang, he's welcomed by Dock like a prodigal son returning to the fold and has to play along to keep his two companions alive.

Scripted by Reginald Rose—a TV dramatist of the 50s second in prominence only to Paddy Chayefsky; his best-known work is probably *12 Angry Men*—*Man of the West* is shot in CinemaScope, yet it's initially hampered by the shallow

dramatic space associated with television. This effect is made worse by the casting, which pairs the stagiest of stage actors (Cobb) with the most cinematic of movie actors (Cooper, at fifty-seven only three years from retirement). But Mann is canny enough to turn these limitations to his advantage whenever he can, offering sly notations about Link's physical discomfort on the train and using a long, tense scene inside the farmhouse to create claustrophobia before sending the characters outdoors for virtually the remainder of the picture. Once again, the hero is a dialectical contradiction, both regressing toward an unbearable past and making an anguished effort to break free from it—the struggle ultimately engendering hatred, violence, pain, and humiliation, and revealing boundless evil.

Classical tragedy is evoked in both these westerns as all of the characters apart from the hero and heroine are gradually killed off. In *The Naked Spur*, three white men and several Blackfoot Indians die. In *Man of the West*, the entire gang and one captive are killed, and the penultimate shoot-out in the ghost town is an appropriately eerie split-level confrontation between two wounded, supine men—one stretched out on a porch at screen left, the other stretched out underneath the porch at screen right, as if he were already buried. It's a key example of the way that landscape and architecture, people and settings, painting and drama, image and idea, classicism and modernism all merge on Mann's monumental canvases.

—*Chicago Reader*, July 5, 2002

Postscript

Writing about *Road to Perdition* in the *Chicago Reader* the following week, I concluded: "What bothers me is the compulsive reliance on revenge in movies, not only as a dramatic staple but as an embodiment of this country's sense of ethics. It's seldom examined in detail; instead it's usually glamorized, with the avenger most often seen (as he is in *Road to Perdition*) as a model of grim stoicism, driven by some sense of a higher purpose, not simply getting his rocks off. Vengeance is a notion that tastes sweet mainly to the powerless, which often means members of minorities, including the Irish in this story—and that makes it a fantasy of compensation, much as PC language seems most vital to people without the power to change their lives in other respects. As a result, revenge plots have a surefire commercial appeal almost everywhere, which is why commercial filmmakers rely on them. But the moment they go beyond a simple desire to entertain and profess to teach us some form of wisdom is the moment I start to gag.

"A good counterexample is provided by the two Anthony Mann westerns I wrote about last week. Both incorporate some notion of an avenging hero resorting to violence, though not at all stoically, and both heroes' loss of emotional control shows their

vulnerability, not their power. James Stewart actually bursts into tears in the final scene of *The Naked Spur* (1953), and Gary Cooper in *Man of the West* (1958) comes close to doing the same when he punishes an outlaw who forced Julie London at knifepoint to strip by tearing off the man's clothes. In both cases the impulse toward revenge is clearly and honestly marked as a form of regression toward childhood or more recent traumas, not as any sort of catharsis or adult achievement of justice. Perhaps if [director] Sam Mendes looks for scripts worthy of Anthony Mann, we may get something better than double standards and Oscar bait."

Otto Preminger

Otto Preminger (born 1906) directed five films before *Laura* (1944)—one Austrian, four American—but since he disowns them, I haven't seen them, and no commentator to my knowledge has ever spoken well of them, we might as well begin with the (false) assumption that a tabula rasa preceded his early masterpiece.

False assumptions—and clean slates that tend to function like mirrors—are usually central to our experience of Preminger's work. His narrative lines are strewn with deceptive counterpaths, shifting viewpoints, and ambiguous characters who perpetually slip out of static categories and moral definitions, so that one can be backed out of a conventionally placid Hollywood mansion driveway by somebody and something called *Angel Face* (1952) (and embodied by Jean Simmons) only to be hurtled without warning over the edge of a cliff. As for tabulae rasae, there is Angel Face herself and her numerous weird sisters—among them Maggie McNamara in *The Moon Is Blue* (1953), Jean Seberg in *Saint Joan* (1957) and *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958), Eva Marie Saint in *Exodus* (1960), and, closer to the cradle, the almost invisible Bunny Lake in *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965) and Alexandra Hay in *Skidoo* (1968). There is even Jean Seberg in *Breathless*, whose part, Godard informs us, "was a continuation of her role in *Bonjour Tristesse*. I could have taken the last shot of Preminger's film and started after dissolving to a title, 'Three Years Later.'" Or, to return to our starting point, there is Gene Tierney in *Whirlpool* (1949) and *Laura*.

Laura even begins with a false impression. After the credits the screen grows dark, and the voice of Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) tells us, "I shall never forget the weekend Laura died." We go on to discover that a body whose face has been destroyed by a shotgun blast is discovered outside Laura's flat. Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews), a detective, sets out to learn who she was; haunted by her portrait and one of her favorite records, smelling her perfume and fingering her clothes, he fills the tabula rasa of her absence with a dream (we are implicitly invited to do the same) and then falls in love with the dream. At which point the real Laura, not dead at all, walks into the room.

At least four Lauras are created during the course of the film: one by Lydecker (he refers to her as his "creation"); one by McPherson; a third by the audience, who follow Lydecker's narration and McPherson's investigation; and then a

fourth by Gene Tierney as the lady herself, who enters the film to reconcile and confound all the other versions. But dreams have been generated by this time, and for the remainder of the film we see them being tested by and contrasted with their original stimulus, with gliding camera movements serving to reassemble and rearrange all the characters in relation to this central axis, a series of permutations that place everyone "on trial," in a kind of moral limbo. Even our own qualifications as impartial witnesses are thrown into doubt by the shifting perspectives. Like the characters, we are prone to look at faces and invest portions of ourselves in them, to the extent that each important character becomes a different kind of mirror.

To some extent, all Preminger's films are inquiries, and if that is what makes them interesting, it is also what makes them problematic. (Some questions are more interesting than others.) A filmmaker like Rossellini, Rouch, or Preminger who chooses to pose questions rather than answer them is likely to encounter misunderstandings, particularly when these questions are placed within a fictional mode (Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*, Rouch's *Gare du Nord*, Preminger's *Whirlpool*), and even more so when, in Preminger's case, the plots pretend to resolve the questions that the style raises. Thus, in *The Thirteenth Letter* (1951), for example, a remake of Clouzot's *Le corbeau*, the search for the author of poison-pen letters in a small Canadian community so relentlessly places every character under suspicion that the dénouement proves to be anticlimactic and wholly inadequate for releasing the anxiety that has been established.

As the least apparently autobiographical of all "personal" Hollywood stylists, Preminger frequently mystifies the spectator who is looking for a fixed moral reference. When his camera starts to move, one feels that his characters are being not so much shown as observed, juxtaposed, interrogated; when it remains stationary, we might more readily confuse a specific statement or stance with Preminger's viewpoint, but then a subsequent shot or scene will usually come along to undermine that impression. The son of a public prosecutor and attorney general of the Austrian Empire, Preminger grew up in Vienna watching trials—and later became a lawyer himself, after acting in several Max Reinhardt productions and directing a few plays—so it is hardly surprising that he should see most dramatic situations in the form of legal proceedings, where truths tend to be clearly relative rather than absolute.

The melodramas he directed between 1944 and 1952, which comprise the bulk of his most durable work, are largely a series of arabesques woven around obsessions and dangerous seductions. All of them were made for Fox (except *Angel Face*, which was made for RKO), and many of the same actors—Dana Andrews, Gene Tierney, Charles Bickford, Linda Darnell—reappear, like permutations in a recurring dream. Against their own better judgments and intentions, McPher-

son, in *Laura*, falls in love with a supposedly dead woman; Eric Stanton (Andrews), in *Fallen Angel* (1945), plans to marry June Mills (Alice Faye) for her money and then falls in love with her, while the waitress who inspired his scheme (Darnell) is murdered by an obsessive police inspector (Bickford); Ann Sutton (Tierney), in *Whirlpool*, falls under the literally hypnotic influence of Dr. Korvo (José Ferrer) and thereby becomes a murder suspect; a tough cop (Andrews), in *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950), accidentally kills a murder suspect and then falls in love with his widow (Tierney); and Frank Jessup (Robert Mitchum) continues to trust the murderous Angel Face long enough to be destroyed by her.

The technical competence of these films varies considerably (the acting in *Laura*, for instance, is much more polished than that in *Whirlpool*), but Preminger's capacity for exploiting and exploring all their latent ambiguities remains fairly constant. During the same period he also directed two Lubitsch projects (*A Royal Scandal*, 1945, and *That Lady in Ermine*, 1948) and a Lubitsch remake (*The Fan*, 1949); he also made *Centennial Summer* (1946), an amiable spin-off of Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* and arguably Preminger's best musical; *Forever Amber* (1947), the first of his cautiously "audacious" best-seller adaptations; and *Daisy Kenyon* (1947), a stately soap opera with some of the ambience of a film noir. And except for perhaps the first two or three, his interrogatory manner persists in all of these works. But the apogee of this period remains *Angel Face*, the last film Preminger directed before he became an independent producer and certainly the most enigmatic and haunting of all the works after *Laura*. Jacques Rivette described Preminger's mise en scène on this occasion as "the creation of a complex summary of characters and sets, a web of connections, an architecture of relations" and remarked that "the relationships of characters create a closed circle of exchanges, where nothing solicits the spectator."

The fascination and dangers of this approach—more than apparent in Rivette's own first feature, *Paris nous appartient*—are roughly equivalent: if every character and viewpoint represented is open to question, the spectator is virtually required to project his own fancies and biases onto the narrative in order to make it coherent. And this becomes problematic as soon as Preminger begins to calculate these mirrorlike "open spaces" according to intricate commercial assessments of his audience and uses his approach to explore Big Subjects and promote parlor debates in which the intrigues serve an increasingly pedagogic—and occasionally even propagandistic—function.

Without denying the stylistic, psychological, and narrative interest of such films as *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell* (1955), *Exodus*, *Advise and Consent* (1962), *The Cardinal* (1963), *In Harm's Way* (1965), and *Hurry Sundown* (1967), it must be acknowledged that on a thematic level—the level on which they are ostensibly presented—they rarely proceed beyond the intellectual level of *Reader's*

Digest. And if most of the films in this period are accomplished in their overall designs and surface details—particularly their use of period décor and locations—their seriousness is usually compromised by the commercial safeguards round which they are structured. Admittedly, Preminger achieved notoriety when two of these films were condemned by the Legion of Decency; but now that the shock value of the words "virgin" and "pregnant" and the subject of heroin addiction has appreciably receded, *The Moon Is Blue* emerges as a flat, toneless, and innocuous attempt at comedy, while the remaining interest of *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), a sleazy studio job, resides more in the imaginative use of music (such as a Shelly Manne drum solo to punctuate a cold-turkey withdrawal) and the relative funkiness of Frank Sinatra and Kim Novak than in the all too superficial exploration of its subject.

Advise and Consent has been praised as a bold exposition of the inner workings of the American government, a masterpiece of "ambiguity and objectivity," and even as a revelation of Preminger "as one of the cinema's great moralists." But notwithstanding its strengths as entertainment (a cleanly articulated narrative following a large cast through a complicated plot; a fine neo-Wellesian performance by Franchot Tone as the president, and a showier one by Charles Laughton that deftly mixes ham with a more subtle wry; a lot of sensually grandiloquent tracks and cranes around Washington locations), the question remains how serious it actually is about its subject. When the Saul Bass credits conclude with the dome of the Capitol lifting to reveal Preminger's name, the limitations of the whole enterprise are already apparent.

The film is concerned not so much with politics or government as with public relations. According to its dramaturgy, the central issues involved in the appointment of Robert Leffingwell (Henry Fonda) as secretary of state are his inconsequential fellow-traveler past and a homosexual episode in the past of the senator (Don Murray) investigating him. Neither of these facts is shown to have any political importance apart from these men's public reputations, but fundamentally the film is concerned with nothing else—it appears, in fact, that much labor was expended so that the audience wouldn't have to worry about the political issues at all. In the climactic speech—which, far from being objective, is clearly designed to impress us with its moral justice—Senator Munson (Walter Pidgeon) condemns the blackmailing Senator Van Ackerman (George Grizzard) by asserting, "We tolerate just about anything here—fanaticism, prejudice, demagoguery— . . . but you've dishonored us." And this indeed is the stance of the film, which tolerates and even accommodates prejudice and demagoguery as long as it remains sufficiently theatrical (such as Laughton's juicy performance) but comes out squarely against blackmailing, nervous excitability, and bad manners (Grizzard is cast as a pure villain from the moment he appears).

To complicate matters, Van Ackerman is shown as a pacifist while Laughton portrays a jingoist; as Penelope Houston has noted, "The film is as well provided with checks and balances as the constitution." But the net effect of all these counterweights is to convey only the appearance of objectivity, which contrives to make Preminger's hidden biases more subliminally persuasive. Equivalent strategies are to be found in projecting the Zionism of *Exodus* and the anti-Catholicism of *The Cardinal:* he will welcome antagonistic points of view within a single shot so that he can watch them coexist, mingle, synthesize, or compete for supremacy, but he always makes sure that the overall composition of these elements conveys a given slant, and the ostensible appeal to the spectator to "use his own intelligence" is often a very clever means of directing and programming that intelligence. As Jean-André Fiéschi has remarked of Tati's *Playtime*—a film, like many of Preminger's, largely concerned with crowds and multiple vantage points—"we are presented with wide avenues, all the better to guide us on to carefully illuminated footpaths." The journey taken is implacably one from A to B, but we are given a choice of diverse routes by which we may traverse the distance.

Some of the films in Preminger's middle period escape some of the above strictures. *River of No Return* (1954), made to fulfil his Fox contract, benefits from an interesting performance by Marilyn Monroe and a pioneering use of CinemaScope that grants the viewer an unusual amount of liberty in spotting relevant actions and details; and the fact that it doesn't profess to take up a Significant Theme leaves Preminger relatively free to explore the characters for their own sake, as he did in the early melodramas. *Bonjour Tristesse*, despite its celebrated source and more opulent production values, is aided by a similar concentration of focus, as well as a striking juxtaposition of black and white with color to reflect the tensions between a somber present in a Parisian nightclub and a reckless past on the Riviera. Somewhat prophetically, Rivette noted at the time that the passage from *Angel Face* to this 1958 film traced a development from the sketch to the fresco, and in more ways than one *Bonjour Tristesse* represents—and its black-and-white / color contrasts echo—a marriage between the funereal moods and modulations of *Angel Face* and some of the brassier showmanship of a one-ring circus like *Carmen Jones* (1954).

Anatomy of a Murder (1959), easily the most graceful and sustaining of the Preminger best-seller monoliths, is the only obvious instance in his work where the ambiguities unraveled in the style are supported by a deliberately unresolved ambiguity in the plot. Harking back to the thriller format of his better Fox films without the usual undertow of neurotic anxiety, and dealing with the law (his pet subject) more centrally here than elsewhere in his work, he carries us through a murder trial without ever revealing whether the defendant is guilty or innocent,

thereby encouraging the audience to become a separate jury and focusing much of its attention on the legal procedures themselves. In the process, he establishes an evocative and credible portrait of a small town in Michigan, provokes a number of assured performances (from James Stewart, Lee Remick, Ben Gazzara, Arthur O'Connell, Kathryn Grant, George C. Scott, and Joseph N. Welch), and, above all, imposes a lightness of touch that is apparent nowhere else in his work. (Oddly enough, despite its serious elements, *Anatomy of a Murder* comes much closer to working as a comedy than more heavy-handed efforts like *The Moon Is Blue* and *Skidoo*.) Perhaps because of its uncharacteristically loose and relaxed ambience—helped in no small measure by Sam Leavitt's photography and Duke Ellington's score—it endures as the least pretentious and most convincing of all Preminger's ambitious works.

The relationship of the French word *procès* to the English word *process* highlights a preoccupation common to most of Preminger's films that not only places characters "on trial" but carefully charts the changes they go through in relation to various corporate and social entities. A standard criterion of implicit or explicit judgment for Preminger is social adaptability, and the typical villain or victim is usually identified by an obsessive personality that is unable to adapt and festers in isolation, frequently behind a deceptive mask: Dana Andrews and Clifton Webb in *Laura*, Linda Darnell in *Centennial Summer*, José Ferrer and Gene Tierney in *Whirlpool*, Charles Boyer in *The Thirteenth Letter*, Jean Simmons in *Angel Face*, Eleanor Parker in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, Jean Seberg in *Bonjour Tristesse*, Ben Gazzara in *Anatomy of a Murder*, Sal Mineo in *Exodus*, George Grizzard and Don Murray in *Advise and Consent*, Kirk Douglas in *In Harm's Way*, and Keir Dullea in *Bunny Lake Is Missing* all embody different versions and varying extremes of this malady, and it is scarcely accidental that virtually all the major acts of violence in these films—excepting only the massive battles in *Exodus* and *In Harm's Way*—can be traced back in some way to these characters' isolation or maladjustments.

One of the many peculiar aspects of Preminger's more recent films—*Skidoo*, *Tell Me That You Love Me*, *Junie Moon* (1970), *Such Good Friends* (1972)—is that with few exceptions, *all* the central characters are viewed as alienated outsiders; it is no small irony that Carol Channing, in an extraordinarily grotesque performance, comes closer to being a balanced and flexible character than anyone else in *Skidoo*.

Much of the unpopularity (as well as the potential fascination) of these three films derives from the way that the theme of isolation versus social cohesion becomes so shrill and ostentatious that all the latent perversities—what one might call the "disturbing undertones"—implicit in the earlier works come screaming to the surface in a torrent of vulgarity, as if some restraining force that previously

submerged, sublimated, or localized these aberrations has finally broken loose to flood the screen. This is undoubtedly an oversimplification: storm warnings are already evident in the garish excesses of works at least as early as *That Lady in Ermine* and *Carmen Jones*, and the increasingly broad flourishes of *In Harm's Way*, *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, and *Hurry Sundown* certainly begin to suggest a passage from fresco to comic strip. When Preminger wants to indicate the prissiness of Jere Torrey (Brandon De Wilde) in *In Harm's Way*, the gesture is so wide and sweeping that one could drive a truck through it; the delirious finale of *Bunny Lake Is Missing* registers like an effort to overreach all the rococo effects the film has already accumulated;[1] while *Hurry Sundown* veers from Jane Fonda performing fellatio on an alto saxophone to liberal fantasies about blacks that contrive to cover the distance between Stepin Fetchit and Martin Luther King Jr.

In *Skidoo*, alongside Preminger's efforts to bridge the generation gap by cramming stand-ins for middle America (Jackie Gleason, Channing, Mickey Rooney) and counterculture (Alexandra Hay, John Philip Law) into the same shots and putting Gleason through an acid trip, one finds an attempt to blend all sorts of irreconcilable Hollywood genres, or what Richard McGuinness has called "comic books' calcifications of them." Both these attempts achieve a tacky (if appropriate) apotheosis in a Garbage Can Ballet rendered as an LSD vision of two prison guards, when Gleason and his hippie cellmate construct an escape balloon out of plastic food containers. *Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon* saddles its three leads (Liza Minnelli, Ken Howard, Robert Moore) not only with crippling afflictions but with one sexual trauma apiece, each delineated in a lurid flashback; and *Such Good Friends* chronicles a wife's discovery of her husband's multiple infidelities—while he is dying because of medical incompetence—with such unrelenting excruciation that the failed comedy of *Skidoo* and the failed tragedy of *Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon* seem to blend, like a multiplication of two minus numbers, into a very pungent and persuasive (if ungainly) compound of black comedy and bright tragedy.

The muted expressionist undertones of the Fox melodramas become blatant overtones in this late demonic trilogy, and such sequences as the acid trip in *Skidoo*, the flashbacks in *Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon*, and the stream of consciousness fantasies of *Such Good Friends* are unprecedented in his career, suggesting an arsenal of modish tactics that consistently miss the mark: aimed at a commercial target, each technique and topical subject backfires, drawing attention more to Preminger's obsessions than to those of his characters. (Particularly striking is the flashback accorded to Minnelli in *Junie Moon*, a suite of variations on the two sides of both her sexual nature and her acid-scarred face—reflected in the alternate use of Bach and dance music on the soundtrack and the angle / reverse-angle cutting—that comes across like an experimental student film made

out of discarded Hollywood materials.) If the spirit of late Fritz Lang hovers over the grim ambiguities of the Fox melodramas, the ruling manner of the last films suggests the style and some of the preoccupations of yet another Viennese-born director, Stroheim; but it is an uncontrolled Stroheim running amok in the dishevelments and second thoughts of another age, a Stroheim with most of the ironies and fetishes intact but none of the restraint, and—camera movements apart—little of the grace or visual taste. And the inquiries that served to enrich the substance of the melodramas and disguise the superficialities of the big-theme streamliners operate here as a cruel exposure, revealing the limitations of the material at every turn.

Perhaps it is as perverse as Preminger himself to prefer these late camp works to the Sunday supplements of his middle period. Yet for all their hysterical indigestibility, they are candidly (and sometimes painfully) personal works: what is lost in craftsmanship is gained in lucidity, even if this lucidity is often the expression of an ambivalence that borders on the schizophrenic. The last scene of *Such Good Friends*, when the heroine (Dyan Cannon) disappears with her two sons into Central Park, can be seen as the character's triumphant survival of her ordeal if we listen to the sound-track song or as her ignoble defeat if we look closely at her face. Thus, the ambiguity beginning in *Laura* ends in pure and simple contradiction: the blind viewer may say "comedy," the deaf viewer may say "tragedy," but the spectator condemned to see and hear will have to settle, like Preminger, for something else.

—*Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, edited by Richard Roud
(New York: Viking Press, 1980)

NOTE

1. Belated afterthought: almost thirty years after I wrote this essay, an opportunity to see the film again suggested that the stylistic overkill of the final sequence—arguably occasioned by an insufficiently motivated (or inadequately explained) dénouement—may indeed mark the decisive turning point toward Preminger's garish late manner; the next feature after *Bunny Lake Is Missing* was *Hurry Sundown*. [2002]

Nicholas Ray

Raymond Nicholas Kienzle
b. August 7, 1911, Galesville, Wisconsin
d. June 16, 1979, New York City

That Nicholas Ray's professional name was derived from an inversion of his first two names seems fitting for a filmmaking career that proceeded backward by conventional standards, beginning in relative conformity and ending in rebellious independence. Like Jacques Tati and Samuel Fuller, Ray did a lot of living before he ever got around to filmmaking—pursuing a life largely rooted in the radical dreams and activities of the Depression years, which we mainly know about thanks to Bernard Eisenschitz's extensive and invaluable biography, one of the best-researched factual accounts we have of any director's career. In a sense, the celebrations of alternative lifestyles (such as those of rodeo people in *The Lusty Men* [1952], Gypsies in *Hot Blood* [1956], and Eskimos in *The Savage Innocents* [1960]) and passionately symmetrical relationships (such as the evenly balanced romantic couples of *In a Lonely Place* [1950] and *Johnny Guitar* [1954] and the evenly matched male antagonists of *Wind Across the Everglades* [1958] and *Bitter Victory* [1957]), as well as a sense of tragedy underlining their loss or betrayal, can largely be traced back to his political and populist roots. A creature of both the 30s and 60s, he was ahead of his time during both decades.

After writing and producing radio programs in his teens, Ray was invited by Frank Lloyd Wright to join his newly created and utopian Taliesin Fellowship in 1931—an encounter that lasted only a few months but that yielded a respect for the horizontal line that was central to Ray's subsequent affinity for CinemaScope. He also developed a feeling for architectural balance in both character construction and mise en scène that was fundamental to the almost mystical symmetries and equivalences between heterosexual couples as well as male antagonists in most of his major features. (Bisexual for much of his life, Ray was arguably a director who invested both kinds of pairings with similar erotic as well as romantic dynamics.)

Settling in New York in 1934, Ray became immersed in the left-wing Theatre of Action—which brought him in touch with Elia Kazan as well as various federal theater programs. He also became a devotee of Southern folk music, which led

to close associations with Alan Lomax and such singers as Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, and Josh White and to a weekly radio show for CBS in the early 40s that developed into wartime work for the *Voice of America* under John Houseman. Houseman would later produce Ray's first feature, *They Live by Night* (1947), along with the subsequent *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), after Ray taught himself filmmaking in 1944 by following the production of Kazan's first feature, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, from beginning to end, at Kazan's own invitation. He was thus in his mid-thirties by the time he made *They Live by Night*—a film that wouldn't be released until more than two years later, in 1949, owing to the shifting agendas of Howard Hughes, who bought RKO in 1948.

Thanks to Ray's protracted work for Hughes between 1949 and 1953—doing patch-up and piecemeal work on *Roseanna McCoy* (Irving Reis, 1949), *The Racket* (John Cromwell, 1951), *Macao* (Josef von Sternberg, 1952), and *Androcles and the Lion* (Chester Erskine, 1952) as well as directing six other RKO features—he was effectively protected from being blacklisted in spite of his political radicalism. This enabled him—while seeking to become an independent producer of his own work and collaborating on a script with Philip Yordan, a celebrated front for blacklisted screenwriters—to make *Johnny Guitar*, arguably the only film of the period to speak about the blacklist (albeit covertly, within the conventions of a western). It was also his first color feature over which he had some creative control, and he took advantage of this opportunity to make it one of his most poetic works—and arguably the first of many with a stylized mise en scène that often seems on the verge of breaking into the choreography of a musical. (Though this freedom in playing with genre conventions characterizes most of his work, *Johnny Guitar* is perhaps his only film to exhibit a similar freedom in relation to gender: positing two women as the strongest characters in a group consisting mainly of outlaws and the members of a lynch mob.)

By showing how one could place one's personal stamp on all the diverse studio house styles of the 50s—a Trucolor western at Republic in the case of *Johnny Guitar*, together with, among other things, a couple of cosmic romantic parables at Warners, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Wind Across the Everglades*; the same glimpses of suburban and small-town middle American mediocrity that characterized 20th Century–Fox pictures like *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (Henry Koster, 1955) and *Bigger Than Life* (1956, which probably used portions of the same studio backlot); the cheaper settings of a Romany melodrama at Columbia (*Hot Blood*); and the glitzier trappings of a lush 20s Chicago gangster movie at MGM with an even splashier sense of color, *Party Girl* (1958)—Ray was already fast becoming a role model to the soon-to-be directors of the New Wave who were celebrating his dynamic style, especially Godard, Rivette, Rohmer, and Truffaut. And a special feeling for teenagers, especially apparent in *They Live by Night*,

Knock on Any Door (1949), *Johnny Guitar, Run for Cover* (1955), *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *We Can't Go Home Again* (1976), only enhanced his appeal.

Yet the signs of Ray's personal stamp weren't merely stylistic but were also occult gestures of a particular kind: alluding to the direct references to Ray's personality, his first Hollywood apartment, and his recently busted-up marriage to Gloria Grahame in *In a Lonely Place*, American film critic Dave Kehr once noted in a capsule review for the *Chicago Reader* that "the film's subject is the attractiveness of instability, and Ray's self-examination is both narcissistic and sharply critical, in fascinating combination." (The same sort of deadly romantic mix, which led some French enthusiasts to link him to Rimbaud, was noted more critically by Jean-Marie Straub when he once observed that Ray, in contrast to the relative clarity and lack of sentimentality in a Hawks or a Buñuel, "is always fascinated by violence, and so, at a certain moment, he slips on the side of the police.")[1] Furthermore, a passionate desire to place his mark on the work can even be felt in Ray appearing in the final shot of *Rebel Without a Cause*, walking towards the planetarium—not the sort of detail needed by the plot, the theme, or the mise en scène, but something closer to a naked paw print perhaps, a gesture of possessiveness and exhibitionism that paradoxically thrives on an innate sense of privacy.

Indeed, by the time Ray had burned most of his bridges in Hollywood while veering in the direction of cosmic international parables (including *Bitter Victory* and *The Savage Innocents*, two of his finest and most affecting films), he was arguably beginning to value gestures of a certain defiant and personal nature over practically anything else. This was certainly the sense I had of Ray when I met him a few times in the mid-70s, in Cannes, Paris, and lower Manhattan, while he was still working on two separate versions of his radical independent feature with hippie and student collaborators, *We Can't Go Home Again* (the second and better of which was sadly never completed), when the bravado style of the maverick became his principal calling card. It could be argued that the splintered effects of his most expensive and least expensive features, made a decade apart—*55 Days in Peking* (1963) and *We Can't Go Home Again*—represent two different kinds of shambles, although both certainly have their expressive moments. (If I had to choose between them, I'd probably opt for the second, certainly the more original of the two.) Sterling Hayden's tag line in *Johnny Guitar*, "I'm a stranger here myself," eventually became Ray's motto and perhaps even his alibi, making it appropriate that a sympathetic feature-length documentary about him made in 1974 by David Helpern Jr. and James C. Gutman carried that title. (For a sharp and tender account of his last years by Susan Ray, the last of his many wives, see her essay "The Autobiography of Nicholas Ray," which serves as introduction to

the 1993 collection of his writing and transcribed classes, *I Was Interrupted*, which she edited.)

By that time, almost a decade had passed since he collapsed on the set of *55 Days at Peking*, his last commercial effort, and was subsequently barred from returning (the remaining direction assigned to Andrew Marton and Guy Green), the ravages of drugs and alcoholism having curtailed his capacities for sustained work. This eventually changed, shortly before his death, when he joined AA and successfully gave up drinking, only to develop brain cancer—a tragedy that limited his final effort, a collaboration with Wim Wenders that yielded two versions of the same film, *Nick's Movie* and *Lightning over Water* (both 1980), that were principally an act of witness to his dying, in which his creative participation, owing to his physical condition, was only fitful. (The first version, edited by Peter Przygodda and recently released on DVD in France, is said to be the more accurate as an account of the shooting—although the second, available on DVD in the U.S., contains an unforgettably ferocious monologue delivered by Ray in the hospital to a video camera.)

Yet the strength of his first dozen or so years as a filmmaker remains unshakable: eighteen features, most of which could plausibly be called masterpieces of one kind or another—at the very least, *They Live by Night*, *In a Lonely Place*, *On Dangerous Ground*, *The Lusty Men*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Bigger Than Life*, *Bitter Victory*, *Wind Across the Everglades*, *Party Girl*, and *The Savage Innocents*, and potent stretches in most of the others, including even *King of Kings* (1961). Robin Wood once noted that no one ever gives a bad performance in a Ray film, not even Anthony Quinn, and on balance the statement is far less hyperbolic than it sounds. It's hard to think of another western with as many vivid and singular characters as *Johnny Guitar*, or two wooden actors used more creatively and movingly than Robert Taylor and Cyd Charisse in *Party Girl*. Maybe that's because even within a vision as fundamentally bleak and futile as Ray's, a clear view of paradise is never entirely out of mind or even definitively out of reach. This is the utopian promise of the 30s and the 60s that his work keeps alive, and it remains a precious legacy.

—*Senses of Cinema* (Australian Web site), no. 21, July–August 2002

NOTE

1. Quoted in Phil Mariani, "An Interview with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet," *Wedge: An Aesthetic Inquiry*, no. 1 (Summer 1982): 26.

Exiles in Modernity

Films by Edward Yang

> Taiwan is somehow within the world system as its citizens are in their city boxes: prosperity and constriction all at once; the loss of nature. . . . What is grand and exhilarating, light itself, the hours of the day, is nonetheless here embedded in the routine of the city and locked into the pores of its stone or smeared on its glass: light also being postmodern, and a mere adjunct to the making of reproducible images.
>
> —Fredric Jameson, "Remapping Taipei," in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (1992)

> These people have so much money stuffed up their ass it's beyond belief! You know, in ten years this place [Taipei] will be the center of the world. The future of Western civilization lies right here. And you know what the odd thing is? We used to study history—the nineteenth century was the glorious age of imperialism, right? Just wait till you see the twenty-first century . . . —English character in Edward Yang's *Mahjong*

> The bombs we plant in each other are ticking away. —Edward Yang

During those rare moments of reflection when I'm not doing what film critics are supposed to be doing—watching and evaluating movies that propose various escapes from modern life—I wonder what a different kind of cinema might be, a cinema that would lead us back into the modern world and teach us something about it. To imagine such a cinema requires traveling some distance from where we are, spiritually as well as geographically; it means rediscovering versions of the past and future, along with the present, and rediscovering the state of the planet, not in terms of American interests but in terms of others who see both it and us with a kind of clarity we don't have.

For the past decade I've been discovering clues about this new kind of cinema in two very different places—in Iran, chiefly through the films of Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and in Taiwan, through those of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang: all four filmmakers have been redefining modernity in the world as well as in cinema. With the help of other filmmakers from the same countries (and I'm not counting the Taiwanese and Iranian directors who are interested in making Hollywood movies, the most successful of whom is Ang

Lee), each pair has been charting a new field of inquiry and exploration between them.

It seems an unlikely pair of countries, given how little Iran and Taiwan seem to have in common. But recent art films in both countries have a close relation to Italian neorealism and a relative freedom from the star system. In Iranian cinema, the new field of inquiry is the social impact of cinema itself, how it unites as well as divides people—a social fact that encompasses rich and poor, city and country, sacred and profane. Above all, inquiries are made into social space and physical landscape; sometimes "the cinema" figures only metaphorically or by analogy: it may be what a driver sees through the windshield of his car (as in Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*) or what a little girl encounters in the streets of Tehran during a continuous stretch of real time (as in Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon*).

By contrast, the principal discovery being made by Taiwanese directors is their own history—a discovery made possible by the recent loosening of Taiwanese censorship, making the country's history a permissible subject for the first time. This new field of inquiry—which also involves a remapping of physical space—must negotiate the coexistence of colonizer with colonized; Confucianism with capitalism, democracy, and socialism; China with Japan and America; and personal identity with corporate and national identities. These densely layered "texts" ask to be read and reread.

Since 1985, when his *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* came out, only two of Hou's seven films have been set squarely and exclusively in the present. On the other hand, only two of Yang's seven films to date qualify as period pieces: his first and shortest, the half-hour *Expectations* (1982), and his fifth and longest, *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991). Yet I'd argue that the two filmmakers are equally preoccupied with history; the sheer presentness of Yang's contemporary films is every bit as grounded in the twentieth-century history of Taiwan as the pastness of Hou's period films is. All of them, to paraphrase Yang, are about the bombs we plant in one another, and all are historical in much the same way that Jean-Luc Godard's contemporary films of the mid-60s were—as global newspapers that tell us what's going on.

By and large, in both Iran and Taiwan, the members of each pair are rivals, even though they've influenced each other. They've even collaborated on the same picture—in both cases working on a single feature that eventually proved a watershed in their work. In 1985 (the same year he apparently came into his own with *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*) Hou starred in and collaborated on the script of Yang's *Taipei Story*, a film that helped to change the face of Taiwanese cinema. And in 1990 Kiarostami made *Close-up*—a film partly about Makhmalbaf that features him in the closing sequence—which altered the face of Iranian cinema even more.

In each pair, one director is more traditional and closer to the working class (Hou, Makhmalbaf), while the other is closer to the middle class and more influenced by the West, especially European culture. Yang is as clearly marked by Michelangelo Antonioni (at least in a few of his films that have contemporary settings) as Kiarostami is by Roberto Rossellini and Jacques Tati. (Yang, born in Shanghai in 1947 and mainly raised in Taipei, also lived for several years in the United States, getting a master's in computer design at the University of Florida and then working as a computer designer for seven years in Seattle after a semester of film school at the University of Southern California; he returned to Taipei in 1981 to embark on filmmaking.)

Part of what's valuable about these four directors is what's also made their films relatively unmarketable here—meditative narrative rhythms combined with a preference for long shots and medium shots over close-ups, an approach that both assumes and encourages analytical distance rather than simple immersion in the action. (This principle is somewhat less marked in Makhmalbaf, but it's still operative.) Despite resistance by most U.S. distributors and critics, however, all four directors have begun to make inroads here by virtue of their mastery and persistence.

Paradoxically, the most Western of the four, Yang, has had to wait the longest to reach Chicago. But for the past several years Barbara Scharres has been patiently and meticulously planning a complete Yang retrospective at the Film Center, which finally started at the beginning of this month and will continue for two weeks, capped by several appearances by Yang himself. In fact, this is probably the most comprehensive presentation of Yang's work ever in the West and thus represents a rare opportunity to see the films of an artist who may have more to say about the direction of modern life than any other filmmaker currently working.

The most novelistic of the four directors, Yang is also in some ways the most challenging: his complex plots typically incorporate several crisscrossing narrative strands, and he dares us to keep track of them all. Of the four he's also the one most fully engaged with the problems of contemporary urban life, and the one most preoccupied with the relationship between his characters and both architecture and objects. Yet apart from Fredric Jameson's dense, suggestive study of Yang's *The Terrorizers* (1986), quoted above, Yang's cinema remains terra incognita in this country, though there have been a few festival showings. Thus I can't say that I know most of his films well because I've had to depend mainly on video copies to see them.

Nevertheless, I have no doubt that the 230-minute version of *A Brighter Sum-*

mer Day—which I was lucky enough to see in Taipei—belongs in the company of key works of our era: Kira Muratova's *The Asthenic Syndrome*, Bela Tarr's *Sátántangó*, Kiarostami's *Close-up*, *Life and Nothing More . . .* , and *Taste of Cherry*, and Hou's trilogy, *City of Sadness*, *The Puppet Master*, and *Good Men, Good Women*. (I should add that, ironically, *A Brighter Summer Day* may also be the easiest of Yang's features to follow as a narrative—even easier than the markedly different 202-minute version Yang was forced to create in order to find a distributor.) Indeed, Yang's film surpasses these other masterpieces in its novelistic qualities, richly realizing a physical and social world as dense with family, community, and other personal ties as any John Ford film and furnished with more sheer physical presence (including characters, settings, and objects) than any other fiction film I know of from the 90s. It took Yang four years to prepare—much of the time apparently spent training his superb cast, which is mainly composed of nonprofessionals. In fact, this film is so uncommonly good that Yang's other very impressive works pale beside it.

A Brighter Summer Day was inspired by a true incident, a touchstone from Yang's youth (though reportedly he's transformed the event to the point where it bears little relationship to the original): the killing of a fourteen-year-old girl by a male high-school student in Taipei on June 15, 1961. Yang frames the film with recitations over the radio of the names of students graduating from the same school in 1960 and 1961. (The school, which still stands in downtown Taipei, is one of the film's central locations.) The title comes from the lyrics of the Elvis Presley song "Are You Lonesome Tonight?"—lyrics phonetically transcribed by the hero's sister so that a younger friend, Cat, can learn to sing them.

The Elvis song is only one of many cherished artifacts belonging to the film's characters that come from somewhere else. A samurai sword found by the hero, Si'r, in his family's Japanese house, left by a former Japanese occupant, becomes the murder weapon, and a tape recorder left by the American army in the 50s records Cat's version of the Elvis song. An old radio that for most of the picture doesn't work because Si'r took it apart long ago, when his parents bought it, eventually broadcasts the list of graduating students (in this case the emblem comes from a different time rather than place). And a flashlight Si'r steals in the first extended scene from a film studio next to the school, where he periodically hides in the rafters to watch movies being shot, makes a fascinating progress through the film as intricate and various as that of any character.

That these objects come from elsewhere is central to the existential crisis undergone by all the characters, who have to grab a sense of self wherever they can find it. A charismatic gang leader in hiding who becomes a role model for Si'r describes spending most of his cloistered time reading "swordsmen" novels; he cites *War and Peace* as his favorite in that genre, and the only one whose title he

remembers. Much later in the film, Si'r asks his sister, who's trying to save him with her Christianity (another import), whether she's ever read *War and Peace*. A Russian novel being seen as part of a Japanese tradition only begins to describe the cultural alienation and isolation of a country occupied by the Japanese and Kuomintang, not to mention the American army. By the same token, when Si'r and some of his friends go to see *Rio Bravo*, they seem as distant from the world of Hawks's western as the central characters in Godard's *Contempt* are from the *Odyssey*. (Another Hollywood film, *The Misfits*—alluded to in posters outside a theater—seems equally emblematic.)

The social landscape of *A Brighter Summer Day* is haunted, as Malaysian-born Chinese film critic Stephen Teo has suggested, by the absence of strong father figures. Similarly, Taiwanese identity is informed by a sense of perpetual exile: Si'r's father is a civil servant who came to Taipei from Shanghai (as did Yang's father), one of millions of mainlanders who fled the civil war in 1949. Si'r's father is so weakened by the repressive thumb of the secret police and Taiwan's militarized culture that he blames himself for his son's failures at school, failures that actually stem from Si'r's gang activities—which also clearly have grown out of an insecure sense of his own identity. (The father and son's two memorable walks home from school with their bikes, each time after Si'r has gotten into serious trouble, touchingly recognize their shared vulnerability.) Ming—the sensitive, flirtatious, unstable teenager Si'r falls for—is growing up without any father at all and is saddled with a mother as vulnerable as Si'r's father. As Teo writes, "Throughout the film, we get the feeling that Xiao Ma [Si'r's best friend], Si'r, his family and most of his friends do not belong to Taiwan and are trying desperately to adapt." Refusing to judge any of his characters, Yang accords them all a compassionate respect and understanding that compels us to share their dilemmas.

The Yang features set in the present that precede and follow *A Brighter Summer Day* also posit an alien, high-tech society where everyone and no one belongs. But Yang's different stylistic approach to the roots of this condition in his epic and thematic "prequel" sets this film apart from those others. Jameson rightly sees *The Terrorizers* as bathed in a "postmodern" light, but this is mainly a nocturnal film defined by a no less postmodern darkness: enveloping pools of darkness, punctuated by beams from the stolen flashlight and other scattered forms of illumination, are extended by the power outages that, judging by this film and *Taipei Story*, are a distinguishing feature of Taiwanese life. The sense of an encroaching void broken by a few warm islands of light in which tenuous relationships flicker recalls Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* in more ways than one. (Think of the planetarium sequence in Ray's film and the extended stretch in the deserted house.) Indeed, imagine a *Rebel* that culminates with

James Dean murdering Natalie Wood, then bewailing his loss, and you'll get some measure of the tragic and lyrical despair underlying Yang's vision.

What else can I recommend in this retrospective, based on my incomplete acquaintance with Yang's work? I wouldn't hesitate to call *Taipei Story* (1985) a masterpiece, and *A Confucian Confusion* (1994) and *Mahjong* (1996) major works by any standard despite their difficulty. The only other Yang feature that remains to be shown is his first—*That Day on the Beach* (1983)—which I've seen only on video and so don't feel qualified to discuss. (Screen size, composition, and the relation of sound to image are so central to Yang's art that not even letterboxed videos can do his work justice.)

Taipei Story is sustained in part by Hou Hsiao-hsien's remarkable lead performance as a disillusioned textiles businessman, once an ace baseball player. It begins and ends with decorous, melancholy voids: Hou and his lover, a high-level executive, inspect an empty apartment in the opening, and the end juxtaposes a meaningless death with what seem like acres of new office space. In between, the couple's relationship falls apart against a backdrop of speculation, failed businesses, and eerie new buildings waiting to be filled. Much as *The Terrorizers* evokes the chance encounters and ambiguous photographic images of Antonioni's *Blowup*, this film about the interrelated perils of love and capitalism is periodically reminiscent of Antonioni's *Eclipse:* the places occupied and unoccupied feel similarly haunted, and a constellation of characters both older and younger than the two leads extends the sense of malaise to other generations. Unfortunately, this brief description makes *Taipei Story* sound more schematic and less poetic than it is; the moods it conjures up are potent and indelible.

In broad terms, *A Confucian Confusion* and *Mahjong* are rich orchestral versions of the same themes played as chamber music in *Taipei Story*—more intricate narrative mosaics also concerned about the effects of capitalism on personal relationships in Taipei. The more satiric of the two, the independently produced *A Confucian Confusion*, is set over a couple of frenetic days and weaves a web of romantic, sexual, and professional intrigues among an energetic businesswoman, her reckless fiancé, a TV talk-show hostess, an alienated novelist, and an avant-garde playwright, among others. (Since Yang wrote and directed two plays between *A Brighter Summer Day* and *A Confucian Confusion*—the one-act *Likely Consequence* and the four-act *Period of Growth*—it's tempting to read the playwright as a cruelly parodic self-portrait.)

In a statement printed in the press book for *A Confucian Confusion*, Yang describes the film's philosophical and spiritual underpinnings in historical terms:

> Like all the books on Chinese history we studied, over 2,500 years' worth, and most of the recent Chinese-language films that depict the past, poverty and sufferings are central themes. Wealth was never really intended for the people in Confucian doctrines, which enforced more than anything else the central authority's legitimacy with rigid social structures coated with moral justifications to stress conformism, discipline and personal sacrifices for social harmony and group security. Ironically, this conformism and discipline bore fruit to all these countries in their economic miracles and double-digit annual growths of the past two decades. Suddenly, as a result, we find ourselves in a position where we have run out of Confucian teachings, as well as Western solutions such as Democracy, from which to model ourselves. We may know how to tell the world what to do, as with the human rights issues, but do we know how to tell ourselves what to do for our own future? This confusion has created ever threatening anxieties in all the details of our daily lives.

I can't pretend to comment on the precise ways in which business dealings in present-day Taiwan interface with crime and vice versa, but clearly this interface is one of the subjects in both *Mahjong* and Hou's most recent feature, *Goodbye South, Goodbye*. To some extent this interfacing can be found in every country (though what's defined as "crime" in each clearly differs), but it has a particular impact in Taiwanese art cinema, some of which is financed by gangsters—a condition I'd wager won't be found in most other countries (though it's perhaps even more prevalent in Hong Kong). This fact plays into some of the ethical ambiguities Yang touches on in his statement. Put another way, some of the teenage gang members in *A Brighter Summer Day* appear to have grown up into the entrepreneurs in *Mahjong*. Unless my memory is playing tricks on me, "Redfish" is the name not only of an important character in *Mahjong*—the son of a tycoon who's disappeared owing $100 million to local mobsters—but also of a gang member in *A Brighter Summer Day*.

Mahjong is Yang's angriest and most provocative film, and also probably the one that's elicited the most anger from viewers, especially in the West. Though I prefer it in many ways to *A Confucian Confusion*, it's been widely criticized for something I like most about it—the inclusion of French, English, and American characters. Many have said that at least one of these parts is poorly acted—the English character quoted at the beginning of this review (Nick Erickson, a last-minute replacement for David Thewlis)—but that accusation strikes me as half wrong and three-quarters irrelevant. What's valuable about these characters is the fresh and fascinating insights they provide into how Westerners—and westernization—might be regarded from a Taiwanese perspective. If this viewpoint strikes us as odd and oblique, I'm sure that's no less the case when Asians see Asian charac-

ters in Western films. Acting styles in Western and Asian filmmaking are clearly not the same, and beyond this difference lies a collision of cultural identities close to the center of Yang's frenzied maelstrom.

Critic Kent Jones has written about the effect of music on contemporary life and filmmaking—in particular, the cumulative effect of driving with the radio on—describing "the simultaneous feeling of driving and being driven" that has "created a new strain of narrative filmmaking that risks seeming weightless and uprooted in order to build from this new genre of modern experience." Jones identifies this strain in such diverse films as *Breaking the Waves*, *Irma Vep*, all of Atom Egoyan's movies, the recent work of Wong Kar-wai, and Yang's last two features.

Alternating between the abrasive and the poignant, the sad and the terrifying, *Mahjong* offers a demonic tour of modern life that culminates in one of the most shocking, dramatically powerful murders I've ever witnessed in a film. This scene of forces spinning out of control virtually defines Yang's dark sense of the present historical moment, even if he chooses to go beyond it and end on an unexpected grace note of tenderness and repose. Like the murder at the center of *A Brighter Summer Day*, this one resonates with tragic clarity as a moment when driving and being driven become one.

—*Chicago Reader*, November 7, 1997

Hou Hsiao-hsien

Becoming Taiwanese

> We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.
>
> —Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Mother Night*

How significant is it that neither of the two greatest working narrative filmmakers is fluent in English? Not very. But it might be logical. After all, most of the people in the world, including those in Iran and Taiwan, don't speak English, even though that places them, in American eyes, in the margins, outside even the online global culture.

If being in the margins means being in the majority, it stands to reason that Abbas Kiarostami and Hou Hsiao-hsien, as chroniclers of what's happening on the planet at the moment, should both be poet laureates of the sticks—though they don't have much in common beyond a taste for filming in long shot, pioneering direct sound recording in their national cinemas (in both cases to honor the speech patterns of nonprofessional actors), and a general sense of philosophical detachment. It's no wonder that they respond to each other's movies so well, even though publications like *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* pretend they don't exist. Both men come from cultures currently undergoing cataclysmic change, for the better, which may be part of what was acknowledged in the prizes recently awarded at Cannes: the grand prize went to a mainland Chinese feature, the best male performance went to a Hong Kong actor, the best director went to Edward Yang (Hou's only peer in Taiwan), the jury prize was shared by Samira Makhmalbaf, and the Caméra d'Or went to two other Iranian directors. As usual, U.S. journalists panicked because Hollywood studios weren't calling the shots—a sure sign that world cinema is still alive and kicking: bad news for Jack Valenti, but great news for global citizens everywhere—especially those who realize that democratic reforms in Taiwan and Iran don't have to follow an American model.

One thing that was so cheering about the touring retrospective of Robert Bresson—which played to packed houses around the world in 1998 and 1999, shortly before his death—is how fully it reversed forty years of received wisdom about his

work, which was dismissed as terminally esoteric and pretentious. Pauline Kael, Dwight Macdonald, John Simon, and many other mainstream reviewers had dismissed it at least since *Pickpocket*, viewing it as proof of how perverse and life-denying Gallic notions of art could be, and Orson Welles—who seemed temperamentally incapable of supporting any film director who dissed actors, whatever the reason—headed the contingent of filmmakers who regarded Bresson's work with scorn. But the premise that Bresson was too rarified fell away as soon as audiences had a proper chance to see his films in good prints.

Something similar has been happening with Hou Hsiao-hsien (pronounced "Ho-shao-shen") ever since a traveling retrospective of his own work premiered in New York last fall. The success of the program was even more dramatic because virtually none of Hou's features has ever had a commercial run in the U.S., all of them having been deemed too difficult by distributors—at least until WinStar Cinema, in one fell swoop, picked up distribution rights to half of them. Over the next three weeks, the Film Center is showing all seven of these treasures in new 35-millimeter prints and presenting the only North American print, in 16-millimeter, of another one, *A Summer at Grandpa's* (1984).

This is certainly a windfall. A half dozen Hou films, most of them relatively minor, are missing—his first five, made between 1980 and 1983, and his ninth, *Daughter of the Nile* (1987)—because of problems getting the rights to show them. (The same problem ruled out Olivier Assayas's documentary on Hou, *HHH*.) Ironically, the uncharacteristic *Daughter of the Nile* is the only Hou film that has had a U.S. run, though it came and went so fast this hardly counts.

I've seen Hou's third and fourth films, and I want to discuss them both briefly because of the light they shed on the others. *Green Green Grass of Home* (1982)—by all accounts like its predecessors, *Cute Girl* and *Cheerful Wind*—is a lightweight, technically assured, commercially successful feature in 'Scope starring pop star Kenny Bee (this time as a substitute schoolteacher). It has bouncy musical interludes and lots of zooms and pans, and seems written and directed by someone who doesn't consider himself an artist. Its most serious element is some ecological preachiness against electrocuting fish in a village stream, and it anticipates Hou's later work in only a few glancing ways: a graceful handling of kids, adeptness at filming in long shot, and a taste for musical repetition in its title (a taste also apparent in *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, *Good Men, Good Women*, *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, and even *Dust in the Wind*, whose original title translates as "Love, Love, Wind, Dust").

Paradoxically, Hou started to become an artist when he began to hire screenwriters, almost exclusively novelist Chu Tien-wen but also actor (and more recently filmmaker) Wu Nien-jen. Wu adapted the short story used in "Son's Big

Doll," Hou's perfectly formed 33-minute segment for *The Sandwich Man* (1983), a three-part sketch feature generally regarded as the first film of the Taiwanese New Wave.

The difference in style between Hou as an entertainer and Hou as a maker of art movies—even in a country whose art cinema has been partly financed by gangsters—is radical. Yet bridging the two are populist attitudes that complicate his art-house elitism, yielding an ambiguous cultural blend that Westerners seem to find hard to place. (It's worth adding that Hou dreamed of becoming a pop singer and a film actor before he turned to directing, abandoning the first ambition after an attack of stage fright and the second after deciding he was too short.) For all the differences between the relatively conventional narrative style of *Dust in the Wind* and the exploration of everyday states of being in *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, the two films begin almost identically with exhilarating point-of-view shots of trains moving through green landscapes, followed by shots of jostling passengers inside—a painterly sense of fluctuating light modeling their features as the trains emerge from tunnels. It's also worth remarking that *City of Sadness*, one of Hou's more difficult films for Westerners in terms of plot, was his biggest hit in Taiwan; by broaching historical and cultural issues that couldn't be discussed when the island was under martial law—that is, for the entire century until 1987—it caused a major sensation.

Assayas describes Hou's paradoxical personality well in his preface to a recent French collection about him, *Hou Hsiao-hsien* (1999). He recounts meeting Hou in Taipei in 1984, when Assayas was working as a film critic, and again when he was making his recent documentary, *HHH*: "His manner of slipping from grown-up rationality to childish laughter is intact, as is his way of moving between intellectuals and small-time mafiosi in a sort of studied uncertainty, hazy with grass, alcohol, or *bin-lan* (a plant-based kind of speed). But here where only instinct matters, theory and philosophy assume a growing importance; and it isn't simply a matter of a notion about perception—generally interesting only to filmmakers—but also the classical Chinese tradition, with the gravity and intensity peculiar to autodidacts."

Hou's shift from entertainer to artist also suggests an ambiguity in cultural identity, traced symbolically by the hero of his Chekhovian sketch for *The Sandwich Man*. A young newlywed father makes himself up as a clown with a sandwich board to advertise a local movie theater. When this humiliating getup doesn't attract customers he's allowed to pedal around a cart promoting the new movies instead, but he then discovers that his baby son doesn't recognize him without the clown makeup.

In retrospect, this story could be read as a parable about the existential dilemma of being Taiwanese. Hou was born in Canton on April 9, 1947—shortly

after the end of the Japanese occupation, in the midst of the civil war between communists and nationalists—and wound up with his family in Taiwan the following year. Quite typically, they expected this move to be only temporary. (This story is recounted in *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, his most directly autobiographical film.) Such miscalculations, and the profound confusion about identity they engender, are at the root of Hou's mature filmmaking—along with uncertainty about how much of Taiwan is Chinese and how much is aboriginal, Japanese, or American. Such concerns also imbue the childhood memories of Hou's screenwriters (in *A Summer at Grandpa's* and *Dust in the Wind*) and the overall history of Taiwan in the twentieth century (the subject of Hou's magisterial trilogy—*City of Sadness*, *The Puppet Master*, and *Good Men, Good Women*—and of his attempt to deal with the present using a small-time hood and his entourage, *Goodbye South, Goodbye*).[1]

In more ways than one, Hou has become the most experimental of major contemporary Asian filmmakers, at least since *City of Sadness* (1989), and part of what makes his work so breathtaking is that he never does the same thing twice. In this respect, he seems comparable to William Faulkner in the 20s and 30s—another formal innovator dealing with the history and indigenous existential dilemmas of his own remote neck of the woods. *Goodbye South, Goodbye*, with its jaundiced view of modernity, reminds me in some ways of *Sanctuary*, and the contrapuntal *Good Men, Good Women* recalls elements in *The Wild Palms*; even my favorite Hou feature, *The Puppet Master*, resembles my favorite Faulkner novel, *Light in August*, as a story about seeking or accepting one's own identity. (My other favorites are *Son's Big Doll*, *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, and *City of Sadness*. I haven't yet seen Hou's own favorite, the 1983 *The Boys from Fengkuei*—another item missing from the retrospective.)

I haven't done more here than scratch the surface of these bottomless movies. For instance, I haven't said a thing about the opposition of city and country in so many of Hou's pictures; the city, almost invariably a carrier of cultural viruses, is what the characters need to escape from—the city-based mother in *A Summer at Grandpa's* is literally ailing when her kids escape to the hinterlands. Or about Hou's virtuosic uses of long takes (as in the jaw-dropping opening shot of *Flowers of Shanghai*), his colors and lighting and deep focus, his profound sense of place. Or the carefully delayed exposition in *The Puppet Master*—based on the memories of the late Li Tien-lu, whose presence as an actor in *Dust in the Wind* and *City of Sadness* and as himself in *The Puppet Master*, dialectically posed against his fictionalized younger selves, is unforgettable. Or the stretches of airy and speedy motion by train, motorbike, and car that alternate with patches of aimless

drift in *Goodbye South, Goodbye*. Or how certain exquisite uses of a deaf-mute still photographer in *City of Sadness* (including intertitles for his written messages) and a barmaid putting on makeup at a dressing table in *Good Men, Good Women* become gateways into the limitless reaches of the cosmos, brimming with infinite possibilities. For Hou's movies are about the glory and terror of becoming, and there are few more potent subjects.

—*Chicago Reader*, June 2, 2000

NOTE

1. The only title in the retrospective I haven't noted is *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), Hou's latest, based on a novel published in 1894 and set exclusively inside Shanghai brothels—a remarkable effort that some critics consider his best work. I admire it a great deal, but I also find it somewhat intractable—if only because I can't read it through the critical grids outlined above.

The Countercultural Histories of Rudy Wurlitzer

"What's your name?" she asked.
"I don't know," I said. "I mean, I don't know how to answer that."
I was suddenly afraid of losing the anonymity that existed between us, as if once we knew our names the erotic focus we were falling into would dissolve. I curled my lower lip.
"We're overloaded as it is."
"Yeah, you're right," she said. —Rudolph Wurlitzer, *Quake* (1972)

Squier: We must move southward. Only by expanding can we hope to avoid a civil war and save those institutions we hold most precious.
Dr. Jones: I assume you are including slavery?
Squier: I certainly am. We must not be sentimental if we wish to preserve that which is most precious to us. *The camera cuts to Ellen, enraged by the conversation. As her eyes dart around the room, she and Walker begin to move their hands in sign language. We see for the first time that Ellen is deaf.*
Walker notices her agitation. In subtitles we read what she is saying.
Ellen (*subtitles*): Screw your institutions.
Walker (*translating*): Miss Martin says that perhaps not all our institutions are worth saving.
Squier (*patronizing*): Perhaps. But I am sure she would agree that we must save our way of life at any cost. Otherwise the barbarians will storm the gates and then where will we be? *Walker translates what Squier has said into sign language.*
Ellen (*subtitles*): Go fuck a pig.
Walker (*translating*): Miss Martin has a rather different view. She positions herself more on the side of change, rather than cultural preservation.
—Rudy Wurlitzer, *Walker* (1987)

One has been hearing lately that the 1960s are making a comeback, but what this actually means is a matter of dispute. *Whose* 60s is being evoked, and has it ever been away in the first place? If we're talking about a countercultural state of mind, my own 60s has been a constant companion for the past three and a half

decades, but for many younger people it remains something of a cryptic, unexplored continent.

Judging by the versions of that decade filtered through most movies and TV, the lingering image of dashed political hopes and bad acid trips has been hard to shake loose, even though this necessarily elides certain political victories (such as the civil rights movement) and a few good acid trips that are less fashionable to remember. Yet the persistence of some legends from the heroic side of that era suggests a solid residue waiting to be noticed—a potent collective vision firmly inscribed in the present that has been obscured by such terms as "new age" and "liberalism." Let me propose novelist and screenwriter Rudolph Wurlitzer—who started signing his works "Rudy Wurlitzer" in the 80s—as an excellent tour guide to that sensibility.

The story of the talented east coast novelist who is lured out west to write for the movies is almost as old as Hollywood, and it rarely has a happy ending. Although it could be argued that William Faulkner used Hollywood to subsidize his own fiction at least as much as Hollywood used his limited screenwriting skills, a more characteristic tale is that of Jeremy Larner, author of the 60s novel *Drive, He Said*, whose first screenplay, for *The Candidate* (1972), won him an Oscar, but who has remained in development purgatory and has published no further novels since.

Roughly speaking, Wurlitzer's career to date falls somewhere in between those of Faulkner and Larner. He has continued to publish books as well as write scripts, but where he arguably differs from both—as well as from F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, and James Agee—is in the degree to which he has managed to retain his literary persona in many of his best screenplays. Unfortunately, most of these scripts remain to be filmed, though even if one concentrates on some of those that have made it to the screen—especially *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) and *Candy Mountain* (1987), but also *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) and *Walker* (1987)—the continuity with his novels is unmistakable. (In other cases—ranging from his polish of Jim McBride and Lorenzo Mans's *Glen and Randa* to his uncredited final draft of *Coming Home* to his work with Volker Schlondörff on *Voyager*—it's either fitful or indiscernible.)

It would diminsh Wurlitzer's considerable originality as a novelist to call him a translator of Samuel Beckett (especially the trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable*) into precise American equivalents and homegrown idioms, but that represents at least part of the achievement of his first two novels, *Nog* (1969) and *Flats* (1970). In fact, this "translation" is so seamless and so authentically American that it goes well beyond mere re-creation. Perhaps one could say that Wurlitzer has applied some of the lessons of Beckett to the meaning of his

own experience and has created something new out of the encounter, including a use value that never would have occurred to his master.

If loss of history and loss of identity are the preconditions of the shifting Beckett hero (Molloy, Malone, the unnameable), the central figures of *Nog* and *Flats*—both minimalist constructs at the outset—gradually take on histories and identities, though the extent to which these are adopted as opposed to invented is deliberately left ambiguous. Thus the drifting narrator of *Nog* is not the eccentric Finnish traveler of that name whom he once met, even if "Nog" becomes his adopted moniker whenever he has to explain who he is to other people. And the various tramps seated around an open fire in the even more minimalist *Flats*—all of them named after American cities but so mutable in their identities that they all collapse into one another—add up at most to a single individual. The American ethos behind this process—you are what you do and how you seem, not where you come from and where you go—is one version of the western cowboy myth writ large, and in one way or another all of Wurlitzer's best work is replenished by it.

According to Richard Poirier in *The Performing Self* (1971), it is a process that gave voice to a mainly voiceless counterculture. As he put it, *Nog* "makes the first serious effort since [Thomas] Pynchon to create a style that renders states of being in which separate identities can barely be located, and, when they are, seem merely accidental. Identities fuse and separate without intention and without feeling, as if persons had the consistency of air. . . . For Wurlitzer to have created a stylistic approximation of these conditions is an accomplishment of some historic consequence, showing that our language can manage to reach into those areas of contemporary life where, among its young inhabitants, there is mostly silence."

Though it's hard to imagine a project more inimical to mainstream Hollywood than *Nog*, director Monte Hellman hired Wurlitzer to script *Two-Lane Blacktop* on the strength of that novel, and his screenplay received the singular honor of being printed in its entirety in *Esquire* prior to the picture's 1971 release, where it was heralded on the cover as "the movie of the year." That the film failed commercially after this fanfare is hardly surprising, yet it survives as one of the key road movies of the era. Chronicling a coast-to-coast race between strangers identified only as The Driver and The Mechanic (musicians James Taylor and Dennis Wilson) in one car and G.T.O. (Warren Oates) in the other—the latter of whom immediately assumes a different past and identity with every hitchhiker he picks up—the movie registers as an existential comedy with tragic undertones about going nowhere. Although most of the country gets crossed and many other characters drift through the plot, the process of continuous motion eventually overtakes any sense of destination, and not long after the race gets abandoned, the plot ends metaphysically with the film itself burning up inside the projector.

In a comparable contrary spirit, Wurlitzer recently described to me a script he wants to write for an action film in which the action gets progressively slower. A practicing Buddhist for the better part of twenty-five years—and one who, in his 1994 memoir *Hard Travel to Sacred Places*, sharply criticizes his own work on Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* for its self-consciousness—he has wrestled throughout his screenwriting career with the challenge of reconciling the rewards of meditation with the forward motion of film narrative, and much of his best screenwriting grows out of this conundrum. It also relates to a desire to broaden the thrust of his writing. He once wrote to literary critic David Seed that he initially turned to screenwriting "for relief and therapy as my prose was so much on the edge of being solipsistic, as well as introverted. I needed, or so I thought then, to be more out in the world, even if it meant being battered by a relentlessly profane marketplace." A few years later, he wrote that "the first axiom of the screenwriter . . . is to sublimate language to image." In keeping with this axiom, apart from the loquacious G.T.O *Two-Lane Blacktop* moves along with a minimum of dialogue.

No less ambitious was *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, also written for Hellman, but the ambitions in this case collided with those of Sam Peckinpah, who later inherited the project and ordered changes. In Wurlitzer's version, the title characters don't meet until the last scene, when the former kills the latter; Peckinpah made them old friends from the outset and added a prologue flashing forward to Garrett's own death eighteen years later. The results are an unstable mix of Wurlitzer's dry, flavorsome dialogue—always one of his strongest suits—and Peckinpah's more high-flown and elegaic sentiments, complicated still further by various location disasters and studio tampering. As partial compensation, Wurlitzer eventually published a draft of his own version of the script as a mass-market paperback, introduced by an account of the project's checkered past that pointedly neglects to mention Peckinpah's name once.

Wurlitzer's best western script, however, remains unfilmed—a powerful turn-of-the-century tale about former mountain trapper Boone Pike breaking out of Northwest Territorial Prison with a bullet in his heart and fleeing cross-country so that he can die with what remains of his family. *Mountain of the Heart*—like Wurlitzer's more recent (and perhaps second-best) western script, *Gold Fever*, set in the mid-nineteenth century—proceeds on an epic scale, in striking contrast to the minimalism of his early work, but because the same concentration of language and incident is evident, it represents an evolution rather than a negation of what went before.

These and other scripts reveal retroactively how much a preoccupation with history pervades all of Wurlitzer's work—including all four of his novels, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Candy Mountain*, and *Just to Be Together* (a recent and unre-

alized script coauthored by Michelangelo Antonioni that revises their previous collaborative screenplay, *Two Telegrams*), all of which have contemporary settings. The minimalist histories of Wurlitzer's characters in *Nog*, *Flats*, and *Two-Lane Blacktop* represent not rejections of history but searches for what is essential—that is, useful—about the past in relation to the present. This is also why the postapocalyptic Los Angeles setting of his third novel, *Quake* (1972), charting social disintegration after an earthquake, and the filmmaking milieu of his fourth, *Slow Fade* (1984)—part of which clearly derives from his on-location experiences and skirmishes with Peckinpah—vividly reflect their respective decades. (As Gary Indiana noted in the *Village Voice* a few years ago, all of Wurlitzer's books can be read as "sociological artifacts" and period pieces.) It furthermore helps to explain why Wurlitzer's current novel-in-progress is set in the nineteenth century and why his recent screenplay *Shinobi*—a remarkable Ninja fantasy inspired in part by early films of Akira Kurosawa—is mainly set in the year 1600. Yet another recent unrealized script, *Dark Angel*, adapting J. F. Federspiel's novel *The Ballad of Typhoid Mary*, is set during the same period as *Mountain of the Heart*, albeit on the other side of the United States—New York City at the end of the nineteenth century.

Walker is a satirical fantasy about the real-life exploits of William Walker, the American Southerner and onetime abolitionist who ruled Nicaragua from 1855 to 1857 and altered its constitution to reinstate slavery. Written for eclectic cult director Alex Cox and boldly filmed on location (though far south of the war then being waged against the Contras), it's the most overtly political of Wurlitzer's scripts and sufficiently radical to have evoked the scorn of most mainstream critics, although the wit behind its anger—including several deliberate anachronisms that make its contemporary relevance unmistakable—continue to make it suggestive and potent.

Significantly, Wurlitzer largely views Walker's arrogance in terms of rhetoric and language, such as the fact that the offscreen narration provided by Walker, played by Ed Harris, eerily alternates between first and third person (a ruse inspired by Walker's book *The War in Nicaragua*). This connects up with the use of sign language and subtitles in relation to Walker's deaf-mute fiancée Ellen Martin and is equally apparent in a dialogue with Cox that was published at the time of the film's release, in which Wurlitzer said: "We don't have the right to interpret Nicaragua for Nicaraguans. . . . It's not our business with left governments, right governments, any governments, you know? And we must defend our right to be innocent that way. Our fight not to be sophisticated. We must defend our right not to join that language, to be innocent and to refuse that dialogue."

Considering how many of Wurlitzer's projects are road movies, his most characteristic script may be the one he wound up codirecting with Robert Frank,

Candy Mountain (1987). The hapless hero, a wannabe musician named Julius Book (Kevin O'Connor), works his way north, via various barter exchanges, from New York into the remote Canadian wilderness in search of a legendary guitar maker named Elmore Silk, subsidized by music entrepreneurs who want Silk to resume his craft. Bearing an audiocassette carrying messages from Silk's former associates, Book encounters Silk's discarded friends, lovers, and relatives, who add their own messages to the tape, along with Book's own ruminations and bulletins of his progress. When Silk eventually plays the tape back, the parallel portraits of his gradual retreat into the wilderness and the reasons for that retreat—the culture he has fled—are equally evident. If it's a movement that recalls the shape of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," the Silk at the end of the rainbow is the opposite of Conrad's Kurtz (a figure who has more in common with Walker). Signing an agreement with Japanese investors to turn over a dozen of his guitars, destroy the rest, and make no more, Silk cheerfully abdicates the patriarchal power that Book and the other characters have invested him with and donates most of his life's work to a bonfire.

Given all the autobiographical resonances in Wurlitzer's script, it's clearly one of his most personal works. Born in Cincinnati in 1937, he comes from the famous family of musicians and instrument makers that gave us the Wurlitzer organ, and his own periodic flights into the wilderness from New York and Los Angeles—his principal bases nowadays are Nova Scotia and Hudson, New York—describe the retreats and drifts of his fiction and screenwriting. Most important of all, the deliberate relinquishment of power, a key aim of 60s counterculture, represents the closest thing in his work to utopia.

—*Written By* 3, no. 11 (November 1998)

Samuel Fuller

The Words of an Innocent Warrior

Many film lovers of my generation were introduced to him in an early party sequence in Jean-Luc Godard's already unruly *Pierrot le fou* (1965), playing himself and smoking his signature cigar—a short, wiry firecracker ready to hold forth. Asked by Jean-Paul Belmondo what cinema was, he said it was like a battleground: "Love . . . hate . . . action . . . violence . . . death. In a word, emotion."

By the time the writer-director-legend Samuel Fuller died in Hollywood last October at age eighty-six, his reputation as the last two of these hyphenates was fully in place. Celebrated for his gritty noirs, unglamorous war films, and eccentric westerns, he also turned up in bit parts in everything from *The American Friend* to *1941*. Yet the fact that he's still better known as a director and as a juicy screen presence than as a writer seriously distorts the meaning of his life and career.

Having had the privilege of knowing him as a dear friend over the last decade of his life, I heard a lot about what he called his "copy"—his prolific output as a journalist, novelist, and screenwriter—and relatively little about his directing and acting. In fact, as far as he was concerned, his acting in the films of others—always somewhat extemporaneous, for he hated to memorize lines—was essentially a form of script doctoring. As he once explained the process to me, "I ask the filmmaker what the holes in his script are, then I play a character who's designed to plug them up"—thus yielding the cinematographer in *The State of Things* and the compulsive Nazi hunter in *A Return to Salem's Lot*, two of his more substantial roles. Similarly, I always suspected that he became a director for the same reason that Billy Wilder and Joseph L. Mankiewicz did: to preserve and protect the integrity of his scripts. Ever since he started out as Arthur Brisbane's copyboy at the *New York Standard* at the age of twelve—turning over most of his earnings to his widowed mother—the word remained his bread and butter as well as his life; everything else was simply punchy presentation.

Beginning with his first feature, *I Shot Jesse James*, made when he was thirty-eight, he liked to start things off with a bang, and in keeping with his newspaper background he regarded these openings as headlines. Here are the beginnings of two of his later projects, written sixteen years apart:

PROLOGUE

SMALL SCREEN

BLACK AND WHITE

FADE IN:

EXT. NO MAN'S LAND—DAY (BESCARA, YUGOSLAVIA)
1 SHELLSHOCKED HORSE
runs amok . . . toward Christ on the Cross

2 THE EYES OF CHRIST
fill screen. Two gaping holes. Worm-filled eyes. Broken strands of Yank, Hun and French telephone lines form the Crown of Thorns. The wooden face is bullet-chipped, cheek splintered, nose a highway of wood lice, algae in nostrils, fungi filling half-opened mouth, ants assaulting beard, nails rusting in palms and feet. The Cross supporting the towering figure looms high on a mound that rises twenty feet. Christ is watching a young DOUGHBOY looking among dead for one man. The Doughboy carries his rifle as part of his anatomy, checking dogtags, finds the one he's looking for, removes it, pockets it, HEARS pounding of hoofs, turns, looks up at:

3 WILD-EYED HORSE
rearing

4 DOUGHBOY
dives

5 HOOFS
stomp the rifle, splintering the stock.

6 DOUGHBOY
claws up mound to base of cross.

SUPERIMPOSE:
"WORLD WAR ONE"

In this film you are Ruth Snyder for 14 years. You will share her visual and mental complexities as you live her from 1914 to sit with her on the Chair on January 12, 1928 and you will burn with her as thousands of volts surge through your body

And then you be the judge whether Ruth Snyder should have been electrocuted for her reason of murdering her husband. You judge whether or

not she was insane for thundering her battle cry for all women in the world: "EVERY MAN FOR HERSELF!"

The first of these hyperbolic extracts opens the "final shooting script" of Fuller's *The Big Red One* (though it's hard to imagine actual shots approximating the force of those words), dated 1977; the second comes from the second page of an unrealized treatment, *The Chair vs. Ruth Snyder*, dated 1993. Apart from representing the two portions of his early life that most marked his subsequent work—his career as a crime reporter in the 20s and his stint in the 16th Division of the 1st Infantry in the 40s—both are characteristic Fuller openings, revealing what critic Manny Farber once described as his "comic lack of self-consciousness." (A tireless worker, Fuller seemed to average at least two scripts and one novel a year even in his seventies.)

The same flamboyance appears in the first sequence of *Girls in Prison*—coscripted by Fuller for Showtime's *Rebel Highway* series in 1994, and directed by John McNaughton: A black teenager sees the corpse of her enlisted brother in Korea on TV (the year is 1953), then discovers her mother has died of a heart attack after watching the same live-news broadcast; she proceeds to the studio where the xenophobic, red-baiting newscaster is still ranting and bashes his brains out with a hammer. But this kind of loopiness is equally apparent when Fuller was simply following Hollywood conventions in his own fashion. One of the cut lines from a rugged love scene in *Pickup on South Street:* "I kissed a lot of guys. Sometimes it's like kissing an orange . . . sometimes it's like a grapefruit . . . sometimes it's like getting your mouth caught in a laundry machine . . . but honest, Skip, I never felt like this."

Ironically, for someone who lived so viscerally by words, Fuller was handicapped by several that became attached to his name in the 60s and have clung to him like barnacles ever since: words like "primitive," "macho," "anticommunist," and "right-wing." These were words that tried to simplify some of the anomalies in his style and his politics, but they wound up confusing a lot more than they clarified.

"Primitive" was meant to account for the stark oppositions in his plots, the pulp and tabloid rhetoric that came from a reporter who thrived on sensation, and the street smarts of a city-based prole who tended to write in two-fisted slabs of socko headline type. But even though he wasn't an intellectual—unlike his second wife, Christa Lang, a German actress who collaborated on many of his late scripts (including *Girls in Prison*)—his favorite artists included Beethoven, Balzac, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud.

"Macho" may accurately peg his gruff personal manner, but it doesn't begin to describe the pivotal role played by strong women in many of his films—Charity

Hackett (Mary Welch) in *Park Row*, Moe (Thelma Ritter) in *Pickup on South Street*, Jessica (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Forty Guns*, Sandra (Beatrice Kay) in *Underworld, U.S.A.*, Kelly (Constance Towers) in *The Naked Kiss*—all of whom, one suspects, bore some relationship to his feisty mother, who played a major role in shaping his personality.

"Anticommunist" came from the plots of four of his 50s features—*The Steel Helmet*, *Pickup on South Street*, *Hell and High Water*, and *China Gate*—but how much these plots reflected their period and how much they reflected Fuller remains to be properly sorted out. It's worth noting that the North Korean communist prisoner in *The Steel Helmet* scores plenty of antiracist points about the incarceration of Japanese Americans in concentration camps and the segregated seating of blacks on American buses—two subjects that no other Hollywood movie of 1950 was broaching. Fuller himself liked to recall that when *Pickup* received the Venice Film Festival's Bronze Lion three years later, the president of the jury, Luchino Visconti, was himself a Party member. And in 1987, when Fuller was artist in residence at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he hit it off famously with Communist screenwriter Paul Jarrico, who was on the same faculty. (Ten years later, Jarrico died tragically in a car accident within a few days of Fuller.) As for "right-wing," this doesn't quite square with a Democrat who threw a fundraising party for Adlai Stevenson in the 50s, and a social crusader whose passionate stands against racism were consistent throughout his career.

But old labels die hard, and the task of summing up a contradictory, unstereotypical liberal like Fuller was never easy to begin with. For all his concentration on news and real-life issues, he sometimes had a taste for allegory and parables that complicated his scenarios. (*Shock Corridor* has a lot to say about what's wrong with America in 1963, but virtually nothing about the mentally ill, his ostensible subject.) A warm and life-enhancing individual bursting with youthful energy, he specialized as a writer in charting hatred, corruption, intolerance, and violence, and judging by the outcomes of his plots, his view of the chances of these problems ever being overcome was profoundly pessimistic. Yet fashionable 90s cynicism was foreign to his temperament, and a touch of innocence was present in everything he wrote.

Consider his 1993 treatment for *The Chair vs. Ruth Snyder*, an account of the last fourteen years in the life of the first American woman who died in the electric chair. As Fuller wrote in *New York in the 1930s* (Paris: Hazan, 1997), "Ruth was 33 when she was strapped into the chair for the murder of her 46-year-old husband. During the interval between her trial and execution, she attained celebrity status as a martyr to the cause of women's rights with the feminists of the late 20s and early 30s." Significantly, her lover and coconspirator, Judd Gray, electrocuted the same day, figures in the plot only as an addendum to Snyder's story. Fuller is

much more interested in Snyder's defense at her trial, which covers four pages and ends as follows:

> Inalienable . . . that means rights that cannot be taken away from a human being . . . and a woman is a human being . . .
>
> She'll learn that Man was not made in God's image. Man was made in man's image to be the Boss, the better half, the ruler of the weaker sex, the despoiler of the female that he made inferior, that he made dependent . . . bludgeoned her with his ego and superior physical strength, stripped her of all human dignity and feelings and emotions and ambitions, treated her like a piece of furniture even on her back or on her knees . . . I learned it had to be every man for herself. My late husband Albert, in his typical superior and masculine way, once told me that those words *all men are created equal* in the Declaration of Independence also meant *all women* . . . but I could not find even the thought of including *all women* anywhere in that document of equality written by men who declared their fight for freedom of human beings from tyranny. . . .
>
> *All men are created equal* is man's big lie and I could not stand the stench of that lie so I had to get rid of that stench permanently with the sash weight and chloroform and picture wire. I revolted and killed my husband for *my* inalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

"With Fuller, one always finds both a war correspondent and a mad educator," wrote the late French film critic Serge Daney. "He takes off from an implicit idea: *the spectator knows nothing*—or next to nothing." This didactic / soap-box impulse runs through all his work, though it seldom takes the form of an unproblematical hero or heroine whose correct view of things ultimately triumphs. A sense of perpetual warfare pervades his plots, and madness is as likely to prevail as any vestige of common sense. The brutish heroes of *The Steel Helmet* and *Shock Corridor*—an unabashedly racist sergeant (Gene Evans) fighting in Korea and a ruthless reporter (Peter Breck) who gets himself admitted to a mental ward as part of a scheme to solve a crime and win a Pulitzer—wind up going insane at the end of each picture, and there is nothing resembling a replacement hero in either case to carry the viewer's sympathies.

A typical sore-loser Fuller hero is O'Meara (Rod Steiger) in *Run of the Arrow*, a Confederate soldier who fires the last bullet in the Civil War and is so disgruntled by the South's defeat that he winds up joining a Sioux Indian tribe out of spite. Skip (Richard Widmark), the pickpocket hero of *Pickup on South Street*, is as contemptuous of the cops as he is of the Communist agents whose microfilm he

inadvertently intercepts, yet he feels some personal loyalty towards Moe, a police informer—even when she rats on him—because he figures she needs the money. Thelma Ritter was nominated for an Oscar for this part, which climaxes in a deathbed soliloquy that expresses Fuller's grasp of Moe's life and milieu in all its poignant ambiguity. Delivered to a Communist agent, Joey—who's about to kill her for what she knows—this speech from the script differs only slightly from the filmed version:

> Look mister, when I came in you saw an old clock running down. You watched me flop on the bed . . . Know what a change of pace is? That's what I'm going through. It'll happen to you. It happens to everybody. Corns. Bunions. Arthritis. Backache. Headache. I'm old . . . and tired . . . and it's so hard for me to get up in the morning—get dressed—walk the streets—climb stairs . . . and yet I keep doing it. What am I going to do—knock it? I have to keep working to make a living so I can die . . . but even a fancy funeral ain't worth waiting for if I have to do business with crumbs like you.
>
> CLOSEUP—JOEY
>
> MOE'S VOICE
>
> What do I know about Commies? Nothing. But I know one thing—I know I don't like them!

War, newspapers, and crime tend to interface and overlap in a good many Fuller scripts. In the high-energy *Park Row*, an 1880s newspaper staff functions like a squad in warlike skirmishes against a rival paper. Part of the importance of firing the last bullet in a war in both *Run of the Arrow* and *The Big Red One* is defining the moment when an "act of war" becomes a civilian crime and sanctified killing becomes murder. And one of the many striking differences between Fuller's original screenplay for *The Klansman* and the one finally used—an adaptation of William Bradford Huie's novel, directed by Terence Young (1974), with a script credited to Millard Kaufman and Fuller—is that the former literally concludes like a war film.

Charting racial conflict in rural Alabama during the latter stages of the civil rights movement, Fuller's despairing script ends with the sheriff-Klansman of the title killing his best friend and his only son—both of whom fight on the side of the local blacks—in the midst of full-scale armed combat, then declaring, "You're better off dead . . . both of you."

Typically, the only untarnished characters in a Fuller script are preadolescent children, like Short Round in *The Steel Helmet*, a South Korean war orphan who uncritically adopts the racist sergeant. (As a tribute to this trusting individual, a

similar boy with the same name turns up in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.) A comparable kind of innocence informs the nameless title canine in *White Dog* (1981), Fuller's most misunderstood and neglected major film—an animal trained from birth to attack blacks whose "racism" is perceived as wholly man-made.

In some respects Fuller's most powerful antiracist statement, loosely adapted from an autobiographical book by Romain Gary, *White Dog* was widely misconstrued as racist by people who never saw it, chiefly as a result of earlier treatments written long before Fuller and cowriter Curtis Hanson inherited the project—with the result that Paramount ultimately shelved the feature. (To this day, it remains unavailable on video, though it turns up periodically on cable.)

Along with the devastating experience of seeing his most ambitious film, *The Big Red One* (1980), cut to half its original length and drastically reedited, it was largely this disappointment that drove Fuller into European exile in the early 80s, where he remained until a year or so before his death. Based in Paris, where he was still a celebrity, he found it easier to land jobs and make a few pictures—*Thieves After Dark*, *Street of No Return*, *The Madonna and the Dragon*, *Day of Reckoning*—though the fact that America remained his central subject and context limited him when be had to settle for overseas locations. (In *Street of No Return*, based on a David Goodis novel, Lisbon has to stand in for an American city like Philadelphia.)

Yet for anyone lucky enough to be in Fuller's company when he acted out his unmade scripts—I especially recall the action-packed openings of his *Cain*, his *Flowers of Evil*, and his *Balzac*—the writing and filmmaking never stopped.

—*Written By* 2, no. 3 (March 1998)

The Mysterious Elaine May

Hiding in Plain Sight

INTERMISSION. The lights have come up. The performers and audience mingle with each other. Lyle and Chuck hurry over to a table where a balding, middle-aged man (MARTY) is sitting.

CHUCK
So what did you think, Mr. Freed?

MARTY
As an agent?
(he shrugs)
Let me tell you what I told Tony Bennett. Sing songs people already know. That way if they don't like you they still got something to applaud.

LYLE
But . . . we're songwriters.

MARTY
So, the Beach Boys aren't songwriters? Anthony Newley isn't a songwriter?

—Elaine May, *Ishtar*

It's a truism that writers are among the most neglected creative participants in moviemaking, especially in relation to actors and directors. Yet there's a special kind of neglect suffered by writer-director-performers as writers, and in this respect Elaine May belongs to a venerable tradition. By virtue of hiding in plain sight, Charlie Chaplin, Erich von Stroheim, Orson Welles, and John Cassavetes—four other mavericks who had shifting and sometimes troubled relationships to the mainstream—generally register in the public mind first as actors, then as directors, and finally as writers only in the most confused and uncertain manner.

For starters, given the powerful images these men project as actors, those images often dictate and sometimes interfere with how they're perceived as directors. For all his ferocity as an actor, Stroheim may not have always been the stereotypical dictator on his sets that the studio publicity machines made him out to be; given the affection for him often expressed by his cast and crew members,

the truth may be more complicated than the legend. My own research into the career of Orson Welles suggests something comparable.

"Writers should have the first and last word in moviemaking, the only better alternative being the writer-director, with stress on the first word." This sounds like Billy Wilder or Joseph J. Mankiewicz, but it was Welles who said it, and there's plenty of evidence that he believed it—even if he sometimes took credit away from other writers (more clearly, as it happens, on *The Lady from Shanghai* than on *Citizen Kane*). Similarly, the best idea we can hope to have of what Stroheim's "uncut" *Greed* was like comes from neither Frank Norris's *McTeague* nor MGM's release version—though both provide us with many clues—but from Stroheim's published script, which few have bothered to read.

On the other hand, what we mean by "writing" can sometimes mean something quite different when it comes to developing physical comedy. From Kevin Brownlow and David Gill's TV series *Unknown Chaplin*, we discover that not all of Chaplin's "writing" was carried out at a desk; some of it was done as a director-performer working with other actors, revising various bits of business until he got them right. And in the case of Cassavetes, the erroneous assumption that much of his dialogue was improvised by his actors has only served to obfuscate many of the remarkable achievements found in his scripts. In all four cases, the fact that the filmmaker often wrote parts for other actors shouldn't blind us to the fact that he wrote as an actor first of all.

If we begin by assuming that the actor-director who writes is constructing part of a performance in advance, including the part to be shaped by direction, we'll probably come closer to perceiving his or her contribution. In the case of Elaine May—a writer and sometime director who started out as an improvisational comic actor—the writerly persona may be less obvious than it is with, say, Woody Allen, and not only because May mainly writes for other actors.

Because Allen has published a good many humor pieces in the *New Yorker*, we can easily identify his literary personality in his movies, even when he works with collaborators. May, by contrast, has elected so often to work anonymously or pseudonymously as a screenwriter that even when she publishes a rare humor piece—such as a recent interview with Walter Matthau in the *New Yorker*—we can't fit it into a comparable context. And her determination to avoid interviews about her work has only increased her elusiveness.

Yet if we consider that all four of her features to date as a credited director, three of them written by her, deal with the same obsessive theme—the secret betrayal of one member of a couple by the other—it becomes easy to conclude that a surprising degree of unity can be found in her movie writing. (Her plays for the stage are perhaps another matter and won't be dealt with here.) Although the first two of these couples are newlyweds (in *A New Leaf* and *The Heartbreak Kid*)

and the second two are heterosexual men and best friends (*Mikey and Nicky* and *Ishtar*)—a Jew and a Gentile in both cases—it's clear that all four movies are wrestling with related issues.

So is *Such Good Friends*, a black comedy about marital betrayal that May scripted for Otto Preminger around the same time she made her first feature. (She signed her adaptation of the Lois Gould novel "Esther Dale," apparently out of dissatisfaction with Preminger's changes.) Furthermore, though this might be coincidental, a certain amount of her script work on other projects—credited in some cases (such as *Heaven Can Wait* and *The Birdcage*), uncredited in others (such as *Tootsie* and *Wolf*)—deals with elaborate forms of deception and disguise.

For all their transgressiveness, *A New Leaf* and *The Heartbreak Kid* are still middle-of-the-road mainstream comedies. By contrast, May's two buddy movies define the outer limits of mainstream in antithetical ways—*Mikey and Nicky* through the harshness and hardness of its defiant independence, *Ishtar* through the sweetness and lightness of its blockbuster tactics, in spite of its dark undertones. The lamentable critical and public rejection of both films—the first mainly ignored, the second extensively reviled—is obviously what accounts for May's subsequent low profile in movies, apart from two recent scripts for Mike Nichols and her performance in the independently made *In the Spirit* (1990). The latter, a New Age comedy with a script credited to costar Jeannie Berlin (May's daughter) and Laurie Jones and direction credited to Sandra Seacat, is rumored to be at least partially the work of May in both departments. (May parodies her own secrecy about such matters by appearing in darkness in the movie's teaser trailer for cable to say, "I was in the movie and I'm willing to talk about it, but I don't want to be identified.") A minor effort in any case, *In the Spirit* is certainly eccentric enough to suggest May's creative input.

Born Elaine Berlin in Philadelphia in 1932—the daughter of Yiddish stage actor Jack Berlin, with whom she often toured—she first came into prominence at the University of Chicago in the mid-50s, where she, Mike Nichols, and Shelley Berman all developed their skills in the same improvisational comedy workshop. (Janet Coleman's book *The Compass* offers a fascinating look at this seminal group.) Out of this grew her celebrated partnership with Nichols in a satirical duo that produced a hit Broadway revue of comedy sketches in 1960 and numerous spin-offs before dissolving in the mid-60s. More recently, she has teamed up with Nichols again as a writer on two film adaptations directed by him—*The Birdcage*, last year, and *Primary Colors*, which is currently in production.

Significantly, her first work in movies was as a comic performer, in *Luv* and *Enter Laughing* (both 1967). She appeared even more prominently in her own first

feature, *A New Leaf* (1971), as a terminally klutzy and unworldly botanist and heiress, wooed as a last resort by a terminally spoiled and jaded playboy (Walter Matthau) whose own inheritance has just run out and who plans to murder her for her fortune. The movie—adapted from Jack Ritchie's story "The Green Heart"—ends with a last-minute turnaround in which the husband saves his wife from drowning on a camping trip and decides with a certain resignation that he's actually growing fond of her. But May's script showed Matthau's character committing at least two other murders prior to this showdown, poisoning both a blackmailer and his bride's crooked lawyer (Jack Weston). These scenes were cut by the studio, and May attempted to sue Paramount to block the release of their reedited version.

It was the first of her skirmishes with studio management. The second came when she spent a long time editing her even more audacious (if less comic) third feature, *Mikey and Nicky*, only to have it taken away from her and released in its still-unfinished form. Given that the film starred Peter Falk and John Cassavetes in the title roles, acting in unbridled naturalistic styles comparable to their performances in Cassavetes' *Husbands*, there was every reason to suspect that the dialogue was partially improvised, particularly if one assumed (as many did) that the dialogue in *Husbands* was improvised as well; and the numerous continuity errors only contributed to the film's slapdash appearance.

Such was my own confused impression when I first saw the film in late 1976; without warning, May had converted herself from a satiric Hollywood director into an unruly Cassavetes disciple. Yet the harrowing experience of her paranoid, hysterical tale, set over one night in Philadelphia—the betrayal of Nicky by Mikey, his best and oldest friend, who fingers him for the Mob that used to employ them both—stayed with me. When I was subsequently able to read the script—as relentlessly focused in its crosscutting patterns as Stroheim's script for *Greed*—I discovered that the improvisational feel of the film was attributable only to the success of May and her actors in conveying her powerful writing. In fact, it wasn't until 1980, when I programmed *Mikey and Nicky* as part of a series called "Buried Treasures" at the Toronto Festival of Festivals, and it arrived in a properly edited form, that I could fully appreciate the awesome dimensions of her corrosive masterpiece.

The same year, critic Stanley Kauffmann, who called *Mikey and Nicky* "the best film that I know by an American woman," also noted the title's echo of "Mike Nichols." This wasn't the first time that May slyly alluded in a film to her former partner. In many respects, *The Heartbreak Kid* (1972), her second feature—adapted by Neil Simon from a Bruce Jay Friedman story, with an uncredited polish by May—is a complex response to *The Graduate* (1967), directed by Nichols. Both movies chart the hero's ditching of a dark, overpowering woman (Anne

Bancroft, Jeannie Berlin) for an inaccessible WASP princess (Katharine Ross, Cybill Shepherd) whom he monomaniacally follows all the way to the university she's attending.

In contrast to Nichols's casting of a New York Jewish actor (Dustin Hoffman) as a WASPy Los Angeleno, May's own lead was Charles Grodin, originally approached by Nichols for Hoffman's part, and whereas both movies end with Christian weddings, May's begins with an explicitly Jewish one. Even the use of pop songs as anthems of their heroes' aspirations have ethnic implications: In contrast to the euphoric Jewish assimilation (and mainstreaming of folk music) of Simon and Garfunkel in *The Graduate*—which May is still cracking jokes about in *Ishtar*—*The Heartbreak Kid* offers multiple versions of a pop single associated with the Carpenters' "Close to You," and each successive version registers as more bitterly ironic. In short, working with a Neil Simon script that she was bound by contract to follow, May still found numerous ways to "write" between the lines, and what emerged was every bit as personal as *A New Leaf*—perhaps even more so because of all the ethnic inflections.

Both comedies are striking in the way they set up an uneasy audience identification with a self-absorbed hero bent on ditching his unsuspecting newlywed wife, rubbing our noses in everything about her that he finds disgusting and abhorrent while creating a surprising amount of empathy and compassion for her as well. It's a volatile emotional mixture, and if either movie had been directed by a man, charges of misogyny would have seemed almost obligatory. Furthermore, the fact that May cast herself and her daughter as the victimized spouses only added to the effrontery. (May's gawky performance in *A New Leaf* and its calculated power to embarrass recalls the physical comedy of Jerry Lewis, whereas Berlin's in *The Heartbreak Kid* was sufficiently touching to win her an Oscar nomination.) Combining a passionate will to power as a writer-director with a ferocious autocritique is perhaps the single thematic preoccupation May shares with both Welles and Lewis, and it marks her as an equally dangerous filmmaker.

When a similar sort of ambivalence gets carried over to men in *Mikey and Nicky* and *Ishtar* (1987), the effect is both similar and different. In both cases May shifts audience allegiances back and forth between friends like the volleys in a grudge match of Ping-Pong, to the point where we can no longer be sure who is the victim and who is the victimizer. This isn't to suggest that there isn't also a world of difference between these movies: *Mikey and Nicky* ends with one friend barricading his suburban house against the entreaties of the other, who gets gunned down on his doorstep, while *Ishtar* ends with happy and friendly reconciliation. But the very fact that May manages to plot some of the same obsessive patterns of competitive behavior, crosscutting narrative development, and con-

flicted audience identification over both movies begins to show how single-minded she is.

Ishtar was so widely regarded as a folly attributable to producer and costar Warren Beatty that May's own role in the proceedings—apart from her perfectionist bent to shoot many retakes—was largely overlooked. Though a lesser work than the May features preceding it, it has the most bite as a satire with political implications—a trait carried over somewhat in her script for *The Birdcage*. Indeed, it might have been an unconscious recoil from those implications in *Ishtar* that provoked part of the public's scorn. It's a movie, after all, about the idiocy of America blundering its way through the Third World and about the conflation of show business with foreign policy that, halfway through Reagan's second term, couldn't have been more apposite. The film actually ends with a show-biz agent—Marty Freed (Jack Weston), quoted at the beginning of this essay—negotiating a peace settlement in the Middle East with the CIA (Charles Grodin) as part of a global entertainment deal for his two clients.

Yet the fact that May clearly loved her oafish heroes (Beatty and Dustin Hoffman) in spite of everything—both miserably untalented songwriters, as helplessly naïve as the botanist in *A New Leaf*, the Jewish wife in *The Heartbreak Kid*, and Nicky in *Mikey and Nicky*—only made the mixture more unpalatable for most critics, who presumably would have been much happier with the misanthropy of a Stanley Kubrick. As *Ishtar*'s theme song, penned and performed by the dunce heroes, aptly puts it:

> Telling the truth can be a dangerous business,
> Honest and popular don't go hand in hand,
> If you admit that you can play the accordion,
> No one will hire you in a rock 'n' roll band.

For all its limitations, *Ishtar* is May's touching admission that she can play the accordion; let's hope she'll get more chances to play it.

—*Written By* 1, no. 8 (August 1997)

Visionary Agitprop

I Am Cuba

Undeniably monstrous and breathtakingly beautiful, ridiculous and awe-inspiring, *I Am Cuba* confounds so many usual yardsticks of judgment that any kind of rating becomes inadequate. A delirious, lyrical, epic piece of communist propaganda from 1964—at least three years in the making and 141 minutes long—it is simply too campy and too grotesque to qualify as a "masterpiece," but I'd probably care less about it if it were one. A "must-see" may come closer to the mark, but it certainly isn't a must-see for everybody. This movie has been rattling around in my head since I first encountered it sixteen months ago, yet I can't say it won't enrage some people and bore others. Worth seeing? Has redeeming facet? Worthless? It fits all and none of these categories. To put it simply, the world doesn't make allowances for a freak of this kind.

A Russian-Cuban production, it reportedly was hated in Russia and Cuba alike in the mid-60s, at least among government officials; in Cuba it was commonly known as *I Am Not Cuba*. Apparently it wasn't seen anywhere else until the 1992 Telluride Film Festival, where an unsubtitled print was shown as part of a tribute to director Mikhail Kalatozov.

It's being presented jointly now by Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, but one can't readily lump it with the other art-house classics they've helped to distribute. It does frequently remind one of two celebrated unfinished features about Latin America by gifted outsiders, Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico* (which was studied by the director and writers of *I Am Cuba* during preproduction) and Orson Welles's *It's All True* (unavailable for study until a couple of years ago), but since these films were never completed they don't define a tradition this movie can belong to; at most they suggest the sort of sensual fantasies foreigners are apt to have about South Americans and Central Americans. Started before the Cuban missile crisis, *I Am Cuba* also harks back to such episodic revolutionary epics as Eisenstein's *Potemkin* and Pudovkin's *Deserter*, as well as to historically inspired portmanteau features like Rossellini's *Paisan*. But the baroque style of *I Am Cuba* may ultimately and paradoxically come closer to that of Disney's *The Three Caballeros*, made in 1945.

Auteurism is as much of a problem here as star ratings; it's not clear that Kalatozov is the individual most responsible for the film's distinctiveness. Judging

from its unique, shimmering black-and-white look and the recent testimony of its cowriter, Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the film belongs mainly to its cinematographer, the extraordinary Sergei Urusevsky (1908–74), but I have no way of confirming this impression. (Urusevsky shot the only other Kalatozov films I've seen, *The Cranes Are Flying*, from 1957, and *The Letter Never Sent*, from 1960—the second a hallucinatory tale about four geologists hunting for diamonds in the Siberian taiga that's said to have influenced Andrei Tarkovsky and the Coppola of *Apocalypse Now*; *The Letter Never Sent* was roundly criticized by its production unit as formalist, though it still packs a punch.)

A couple of other oddities about *I Am Cuba* are worth noting—one linguistic, the other visual. The dialogue and narration are mainly in Spanish, apart from a few lines in English (coming mainly from characters designated as American tourists and sailors). There's also a Russian voice-over that translates the Spanish and English, and English subtitles that translate the Russian and Spanish, with the result that most of the English lines you hear are different from the ones you read: when an American tourist in a decadent Havana nightclub says "I'll take a limeade," this is duly translated into Russian, and the Russian line is then subtitled "A soft drink for me."

The film's visual style closely resembles Orson Welles's in many particulars: low and tilted angles, lengthy and highly expressive camera movements, high-contrast chiaroscuro, and the use of a wide-angle lens to create spatial distortion in the foreground of shots and deep focus in the background. Yet if one compares *I Am Cuba* to the feature that Welles was making in Europe at the same time, *The Trial* (1962), the differences in meaning are vast. There's a much closer match between *I Am Cuba* and Welles's 1958 *Touch of Evil*—ironically a film denounced by Sergei Yutkevich in Russia for its "decadence." In part, this resemblance can be attributed to the fact that all of the action in *Touch of Evil* is set in and around a Mexican border town; and if one compares the use in both pictures of a jazzy kind of rock music to suggest corruption and seediness, one might even say that their puritanism is quite similar.

The parallels between Welles's camera style and *I Am Cuba*'s are especially intriguing from an ideological standpoint. Welles remained a leftist (mainly of the currently disparaged "liberal" variety) throughout his career, yet most popular appreciations of his work, *Citizen Kane* in particular, tend to be right-wing celebrations of headstrong individualism—an individualism in which an expressive camera style is always read as personal, individualized expression—triumphing over collective effort. The fact that the notorious formalism of *I Am Cuba* was attacked in both Cuba and Russia in the 60s might mean that it's actually a conservative movie in disguise. But it's much likelier that our Yankee capitalist reflexes may force us to read collective work in individualist/auteurist terms even

when they don't apply, and then give up on a puzzle like *I Am Cuba* when it fails to yield the usual auteurist rewards.

Let's start with the aforementioned sense of decadence near the beginning of *I Am Cuba*, which makes such a strong impression that the remainder of the movie never quite recovers from it. Our first taste of it comes after a couple of gorgeous sequences introduce us briefly to the topography of Cuba and to some poor people living in a village. The second sequence is a veritable theme-park ride down a picturesque tropical stream with a boatman, past huts on stilts where children play and women wash their clothes, and it introduces us to a formalism that more or less remains throughout the picture, quickly becoming its most troubling and fascinating aspect. After this sequence there's an abrupt cut to a jazzy rock band blasting away on a rooftop overlooking the Havana beaches while numerous bathing beauties stroll by—the basic material for a breathtaking sequence without any cuts—followed by a sequence purportedly set in a Havana nightclub. In both of these extended accounts of Yankee corruption during the late Batista period the film is just as two-faced as Larry Clark's recent *Kids* in clucking its tongue at nasty revels it can't get enough of. If anything, it's even more appreciative of what it's showing than Clark's film—which makes it more fun to look at, though harder to process as a communist movie, at least until one arrives at the end of the sequence. As the camera moves several stories down to applauding tourists around an outdoor swimming pool—lingering over a pretty blond woman in a dress who's being handed a drink, then abandoning her to follow a poolside bathing beauty into the water—we're clearly on another theme-park ride. Then, when the camera (and the accompanying sound) goes even further and dips with the bather below the water's surface, we're arguably entering a realm closer to the sex-crazed cartoons of Tex Avery. Back in 1965 Urusevsky tried to justify this delirious move thematically in relation to the previous village sequence: "Taking the camera into the pool is justified because water is the visual link between the two scenes," he wrote. (I assume he was being just as sincere as some American reviewers were last summer when they described the teenage sex scenes in *Kids* as some kind of "aesthetic" breakthrough.)

We next move to the nightclub, where Ignacio—the falsetto lead for the Platters during the 50s—is singing in Spanish about "this crazy love in my blood." A den of iniquity where bamboo poles suggest prison bars and large wooden idols make us think of barbaric rites, this nightmarish cavern with its elaborate Afro-Cuban floor show and prostitutes at the bar introduces us to three male tourists implausibly identified as Americans. The most prominent of these, Jim, who has

a fetish for crucifixes, is played by French actor Jean Bouise, later known for his performances in *La guerre est finie*, *The Conformist*, *Out 1*, and *Z*.

In a subsequent sequence we see Jim take one of the prostitutes back to her shack in the Havana ghetto (a hut that oddly resembles a Russian constructivist sculpture); in the morning he insists on purchasing her crucifix, which she doesn't want to sell. As he walks away through the crowded ghetto, accompanied by the sound of a humming male voice and a solo guitar, the tilted camera, starting from a birdcage he passes, cranes up the full height of a telephone pole, while a woman designated as the "voice of Cuba" in the credits intones, "I am Cuba. Why are you leaving? You came here to have fun. Go ahead, have fun! Isn't this a happy picture? Don't avert your eyes. Look, I am Cuba. For you, I am the casino, the bar, the hotels and brothels. But the hands of these children and old people are also me. I am Cuba."

This, I would maintain, is less hypocritical and more socially responsible than what we get in *Kids*—even if it comes from a discredited ideology and two discredited countries and has to build its polemic around a view of Americans that's every bit as caricatured as our view of Russians during the same period. It even strives to set up a dialectical relationship with its previous appreciation of the rooftop revels and the nightclub—getting us to identify with the tourists and then undermining that identification—a process Clark's film, with its beady-eyed voyeurism, never comes close to attempting. But in current economic parlance, *I Am Cuba* doesn't belong in our cultural vocabulary because it invests all its aesthetic capital in a bad business venture. I guess that means it must be wrong, no matter how good it looks.

There are three more extended sequences in *I Am Cuba*. The first shows us a sugarcane harvester learning that his brutal boss has sold his land to the United Fruit Company and that he has to vacate his house; sending his son and daughter into town, he burns the sugarcane field and his house to the ground before collapsing in defeat.

In Havana we follow the adventures of Enrique, a radical student who saves a woman from a band of drunken American sailors, reads in the paper that Fidel Castro is dead, meets with his comrades, and prepares to assassinate a fat police officer who killed many of his friends, though he loses his nerve at the last minute. Then the police raid a room where students are printing pro-Castro leaflets, and one of the protesters is shot. A crowd gathers, and Enrique addresses it until another shot rings out and a white dove falls. Holding the dead bird aloft like a flag, Enrique leads the crowd, now singing the Cuban national anthem,

into the street, where they're met with water hoses. Shot by the fat cop, Enrique becomes a revolutionary martyr, and as a funeral cortege follows his body through downtown Havana, the camera, in one take, cranes all the way up the side of a building, crosses the street, passes through a cigar-rolling factory, returns to the street through another window, and then continues to follow the cortege from an aerial view for what seems like a good quarter of a mile. (A partial explanation of how this astonishing shot was achieved is offered by the cameraman, Alexander Calzatti, in the July 1995 issue of *American Cinematographer*; it required a "special cable device" that Calzatti built in Moscow before coming to Cuba.)

The final—and least memorable—sequence follows various rebel soldiers fighting and regrouping in the mountains as well as one peasant family dodging bombs and seeing their home demolished; the husband tells his family he has to join the rebel forces and winds up singing the Cuban anthem with them.

Throughout much of the film Urusevsky and his skilled camera crew (three of whom are billed in the credits simply for "pyrotechnics") use infrared film stock that makes palm trees and sugarcane look as white as sun-soaked sheets—an astonishing visual effect that mythologizes the Cuban landscape, making it an appropriate setting for dreams. An estimated 97 percent of the film was shot with handheld cameras; though the early rooftop sequence may seem to be the work of one frenzied individual, it was actually carried out by a relay team of three separate camera operators—a good example of collective work in action. In fact, much of the handheld camera work throughout feels personal without being individualized, an apt reflection of the film's poetic and political agenda.

In an unfinished 1955 essay reevaluating Russian silent films by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko, Robert Warshow found these films reprehensible because of their aesthetic distinction. Given the usual American mistrust of art, it's a telling confession: "It was not at all an aesthetic failure that I encountered in these movies, but something much worse: a triumph of art over humanity. It made me, for a while, quite sick of the art of the cinema, and sick also of those people who sat with me in the audience, *mes semblables*, whom I suspected of being either cinema enthusiasts or Communists—and I wasn't always sure which was worse."

He could have been writing about *I Am Cuba*—a triumph of art over humanity, he might have said, except that it wasn't regarded as any sort of triumph when it appeared in Cuba and Russia thirty years ago. Given that art is a human activity, how can it be said that it triumphs over humanity? Perhaps what he meant was that a film like *I Am Cuba* aestheticizes (and therefore disrespects) human suffer-

ing. But then in what way could Hollywood celebrations of human slaughter—routinely accepted as entertainment—be regarded as morally preferable?

Warshow, I should stress, was writing during the darkest part of the cold war, when the demonizing of Russians went well beyond the mythologizing of palm trees, sugarcane, and peasant poverty. At his best he showed an intellectual grasp of the theoretical implications of film style that surpassed that of his contemporaries James Agee and Manny Farber, but tragically, cold-war paranoia made him as much of a Neanderthal as an anti-intellectual Hollywood director like Leo McCarey. (To read Warshow's attack on McCarey's great if deranged 1952 anticommunist movie *My Son John* is to encounter two brilliant sensibilities in hapless collision, thanks to a shared political mindset that ultimately made everyone who shared it dishonorable.)

Forty years after Warshow's antiart and anticommunist invective, at a time when the communist menace has become a bad dream or camp joke of the past, it would be comforting to say that this sort of intolerance has been tempered by historical hindsight and a more balanced perspective. But, alas, our continuing reliance on demonology suggests that our minds are often still living in the cold war even if our bodies are not. This means that we're still unequipped to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to a bewildering mixture of art and propaganda like *I Am Cuba*; our first impulse may be to reject it all as egregious nonsense. Yet for all its excesses, *I Am Cuba* has plenty of accurate things to say about Cuba under Batista.

I don't want to deny that a certain amount of egregious nonsense is there. But it's no less present in the 1947 testimony of Alice Rosenbaum (better known by her American name, Ayn Rand) to the House Un-American Activities Committee that Russians under communism never smile ("If they do, it is privately and accidentally. Certainly, it is not social"). In the final analysis this nonsense is in the cold-war culture shared by Russia and the U.S. rather than in some bacterium belonging to one side and not the other. The fact that McCarey's *My Son John* remains woefully unavailable on video is as symptomatic of our shortsightedness as the indigestibility of *I Am Cuba*. What we could learn from these two amazingly poetic and terminally wrongheaded movies is incalculable; they'd make a dream double feature.

—*Chicago Reader*, December 8, 1995

The Battle over Orson Welles

Biographies of Orson Welles reviewed in this article:
Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu
by Simon Callow. New York: Viking Press, 1995. 640 pp., illus.
Rosebud: The Story of Orson Welles
by David Thomson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. 461 pp., illus.
Orson Welles
(revised and expanded edition) by Joseph McBride. New York: Da Capo, 1996. 243 pp., illus.

Two prevailing and diametrically opposed attitudes seem to dictate the way most people currently think about Orson Welles. One attitude, predominantly American, sees his life and career chiefly in terms of failure and regards the key question to be why he never lived up to his promise—"his promise" almost invariably being tied up with the achievement of *Citizen Kane*. Broadly speaking, this position can be compared to that of the investigative reporter Thompson's staff editor in *Citizen Kane*, bent on finding a single formula for explaining a man's life. The other attitude—less monolithic and less tied to any particular nationality or to the expectations aroused by any single work—views his life and career more sympathetically as well as inquisitively; this position corresponds more closely to Thompson's own near the end of *Kane* when he says, "I don't think any word can explain a man's life."

The first attitude can be found in relatively undiluted form in six extended works by four authors—Charles Higham's *The Films of Orson Welles* (1970) and *Orson Welles: The Rise and Fall of an American Genius* (1985), Robert L. Carringer's *The Making of "Citizen Kane"* (1985; revised edition, 1996) and *The Magnificent Ambersons: A Reconstruction* (1993), Pauline Kael's essay "Raising Kane" (1971, reprinted most recently in *For Keeps*, 1994), and David Thomson's recent biography, *Rosebud: The Story of Orson Welles* (1996). A more diluted form of this attitude can be found in Simon Callow's *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (1995), the first volume of a projected two- or three-volume biography that basically ends with the release of *Citizen Kane* and the stage production of *Native Son*, the last two projects in which Welles collaborated with John Houseman.

The second attitude can be found in André Bazin's *Orson Welles: A Critical View* (1978), Jean-Pierre Berthomé and François Thomas's *Citizen Kane* (1992), Frank Brady's *Citizen Welles* (1989), Juan Cobos's *Orson Welles: España como obsesión* (1993), Peter Cowie's *The Cinema of Orson Welles* (1965; revised editions, 1973 and 1983), Barbara Leaming's *Orson Welles* (1985), Joseph McBride's *Orson Welles* (1972; revised edition, 1996), James Naremore's *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (1978; revised edition, 1989), Esteve Riambau's *Orson Welles: Una España inmortal* (1993), and Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich's *This Is Orson Welles* (1992)—to offer an incomplete but fairly up-to-date list. (Laura Mulvey's interesting ideological and psychoanalytical reading of *Kane* in a 1992 British Film Institute "Classic Film" monograph manages to absent itself from both of the positions outlined above.)

Though not all of the seven works representing the first attitude have received an equal amount of attention in the U.S., I think it would be fair to say that this still represents the most widely held mainstream position about Welles—the same position propounded in a recent documentary nominated for an Academy Award, *The Battle over "Citizen Kane."* (By contrast, *It's All True: Based on an Unfinished Film by Orson Welles*, a 1993 documentary, represents the second position.) The usual corollary of this attitude is a reading of *Citizen Kane* as a Hollywood picture rather than as the first feature of an independent filmmaker who happened to use certain Hollywood resources. Paradoxically, many of those who single out *Kane* as Welles's ultimate or only major achievement also routinely tend to support contemporary commercial filmmaking practices that would make such an achievement impossible and unthinkable today. For those, however, who tend to endorse Welles's moves toward freedom, diversity, and independence even when this necessitated moving outside the Hollywood mainstream, the jagged path of his career can't be charted according to any simple pattern of ascent or descent; there are peaks and valleys throughout. (For an artist who refused to repeat himself or turn his directorial talent into a commodity, this surely goes with the territory.) I should add that my preference for the ten books representing this second attitude is not a disinterested position; I translated and edited the first of these books and edited the last.

Another major distinction that can be made between these lists is that the first seven works all describe Welles as a deeply flawed, morally reprehensible human being and the last ten don't. Significantly, only one of the authors in the first list, Carringer, ever had any personal contact with Welles—whereas most of those in the second list did, including Bazin, Bogdanovich, Brady, Cobos, Leaming, and McBride, and possibly others as well.

Does this mean that Welles was capable of charming the birds off the trees, hoodwinking all potential biographers and critics? Not necessarily. My own im-

pression, the only time I ever met him, was that he was abnormally self-absorbed, yet so alert to this fact that he sought to compensate for it by being downright solicitous to whomever he was with—a disarming trait, but far from being a smoke screen. At the same time, such was his sense of privacy that I wonder whether part of the moral censure of Higham, Callow, and Thomson might stem from their resentment at feeling closed out. (Provocatively, Phillip Lopate suggested in *Newsday* that Callow's book reads like the work of someone who expected he would have been sexually rejected by Welles—though Lopate perversely finds that Callow's peevish tone gives *The Road to Xanadu* more of an interesting edge than a more respectful and less personal approach would.)

Most of my own sense of what Welles was like derives from numerous conversations I've had over the years with Oja Kodar, Peter Bogdanovich, the late Richard Wilson, and Gary Graver, as well as briefer encounters with John Berry, George Fanto, the late Fletcher Markle, Patricia Medina, Alessandro Tasca di Cuto, Ruth Warwick, and Beatrice Welles-Smith, among others. The composite picture I've gotten is far from complete, but it seldom gibes with the compulsive liar and shameless exploiter that emerges from Thomson's *Rosebud* and periodically turns up in Callow's *Road to Xanadu*. Some of this may arise from a temperamental difference in how we interpret the same data. Berry once described to me with relish his experience of holding up scenery outdoors for an entire morning during the shooting of a 1938 film intended as a prologue to the stage farce *Too Much Johnson*. When lunch arrived and Welles sat down to eat, Berry blurted out how hungry he was, whereupon Welles made a great show of offering him his own seat and plate. Berry was too intimidated to accept and went back to holding up the scenery.

The same anecdote is recounted in *Rosebud*—Thomson, who appears to have done virtually no original research, takes it from a Patrick McGilligan interview—but the resonance it acquires in this new setting is markedly different. Both versions of the story illustrate how adept Welles was at getting what he wanted from his employees, but when Berry told it to me, his overriding and unwavering affection for Welles was what mainly shone through (which makes this a typical and even archetypal Welles anecdote in my experience). But in Thomson's account, thanks to the surrounding context, it registers as one more instance of Welles's hollow self-centeredness, another example of moral bankruptcy.

One lesson to be learned from this is how mythical and ideological a creature Welles remains, a site for the acting out of various fantasies. Critics and biographers of Franz Kafka don't waste much time worrying their heads or clucking their tongues about why Kafka "failed to live up to his promise," despite the fact that his own record of unfinished longer works—and his reluctance to make many of his shorter works available—is far worse than anything to be found in

Welles. Curiously, even the most destructive Hollywood moguls, including those responsible for destroying the discarded Welles footage from *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Stranger*, and *The Lady from Shanghai*, have failed to elicit the sort of disapproval from writers that Higham and Thomson relentlessly heap on Welles.

The bad news about the recent Welles biographies by Callow and Thomson is that they pretend to an authoritativeness about the man's inner nature and motivations that I doubt will be accepted by anyone who knew Welles intimately—or even by most of those like myself or Brady who encountered him only briefly and casually. Conscious or not, the agenda of both Callow and Thomson is to set certain ideological worries about Welles to rest rather than clarify what these worries represent, and exercising moral censure, puritanical or otherwise, is one of the most convenient methods available for carrying out this task. Another is the recourse of both biographers to a kind of spurious and, in Thomson's case, irresponsible word-spinning about Welles's inner life normally associated with fiction. In Callow's book, this resembles the way a Stanislavsky-inspired actor might prepare for a role; in Thomson's book, by his own admission, it often overlaps with the work undertaken by a novelist (although in this case, a rather self-indulgent and self-serving one). In both cases, this enterprise also calls to mind the efforts of certain British journalists to fill up a page with lively patter regardless of whether or not they have anything substantive to say. On this score, both Callow and Thomson are skillful writers whose skill often consists of creating smoke screens. Although they both have functioned admirably in the past as critics, and their critical gifts never fully desert them here, the basic issue of whom they're writing about—not simply what he did and why—is never wholly engaged.

By contrast, one of the invaluable merits of McBride's modest critical study, *Orson Welles*—originally published in 1972 and substantially revised and expanded for its second edition in 1996—derives from the fact that he worked for Welles as an actor on the still-unfinished *The Other Side of the Wind*. This may make him more of a partisan, along with Berry, but it also gives his personal judgments some solid basis in experience. And in conscientiously updating the record on Welles's peripatetic career, he offers a balanced survey of the work that can be warmly recommended as a useful starting point for anyone wishing to delve into the subject. His four-page bibliography, apart from being mainly limited to English-language entries, succinctly sums up the current state of Welles studies—quite unlike Thomson's, which is nearly twice as long.

Although I think McBride underrates *Othello* and *The Trial* and overrates *Macbeth* and *The Immortal Story*, such disagreements are secondary to the fact that he has plenty of valuable and interesting things to say about all four. (His

brilliant observation that Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* "could well serve as a step-by-step illustration of how to film the nightmarish aspect of Kafka's world" should perhaps be set alongside Noël Carroll's defense of *The Trial* as a faithful literary adaptation, found in *Film Reader,* no. 3 [1978].) And his lengthy chapters on *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons,* which take up almost a quarter of his text, manage to be both judicious and comprehensive.

As a writer, Simon Callow has two interlocking talents that make him especially well-suited to write about actors: a comprehensive understanding, through his own career as an actor, of what the craft of performance consists of and a talent for performing on the page that might be regarded as an actorly form of writing. These gifts come together triumphantly in *Charles Laughton: A Difficult Actor* (1987), where Callow's complex empathy for his subject is apparent on every page. Consider the following comparison between Laughton and Laurence Olivier, which shows Callow's writing at its best:

> Olivier and Laughton . . . could hardly be said to be practising the same art. Laughton the deep-sea diver who had to keep coming up for air, Olivier the surfer whose skill took him to places he never meant to go; they had the sea in common, but that was all.
>
> In *Spartacus,* the two modes can be seen side by side: Olivier . . . plays Crassus like a knife: it is an entirely linear performance with every point brilliantly made. His glacial patrician manner, his ruthless ambition, his strong desire for his handsome young slave, are all cleanly and sharply indicated, it is as if there were a thin black line drawn around the role. Laughton's Gracchus has no such boundaries, no such definition. It spreads, floats, expands, contracts. The whole massive expanse of flesh seems to be filled with mind—thoughts are conceived, born and die in different parts of that far-flung empire. Sedentary for the most part, Gracchus seethes with potential movement. He is a jelly that has escaped the mould; Olivier's (and Crassus's) sharp knife can gain no purchase on it.

The close identification that Callow clearly feels with Laughton—as an eloquent ham, as a homosexual, as a multifaceted and educated man of the theater—isn't matched by his troubled fascination with Welles, despite much valuable material in his new book about Welles's acting. If he identifies with anyone in *The Road to Xanadu,* this is John Houseman, whose positions about Welles he tends to adopt wholesale, even where there appears to be some room for debate. However reliable Houseman's memoirs may be on many Wellesian matters, my own

research has repeatedly shown that he can't be trusted on the issue of Welles as a writer; Callow, however, not only trusts him on this matter but regards him as the final arbiter on the subject. This means that on such subjects as the *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast and the *Kane* script, Callow goes overboard in denying Welles creative input, even when this means ignoring or minimizing much of the contrary evidence available.[1]

Although Callow's research into Welles's career has clearly been extensive—which pays off in particular when it comes to descriptions of the stage productions—the determination to be authoritative as well as judgmental about Welles's motives does not always have happy results. Stuart Klawans, in a dismissive review of *The Road to Xanadu* in *The Nation*, had many cogent points to make about its inadequacy in dealing with Welles's politics, noting in particular its failure to mention the Popular Front. (For a detailed consideration of Welles's leftist and liberal positions, James Naremore's book, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*—still the best critical study of Welles available in any language—remains the only extended and reliable source.)

Some of the books on Welles to have appeared are debatable (such as Callow's), and a few—such as the second books of Higham and Carringer—strike me as lamentable, but only Thomson's biography deserves to be called a disgrace. (For the record, however, it has by far better illustrations than the McBride or the Callow.) Much as the third edition (1994) of his *Biographical Dictionary of Film* owes much of its dubious prestige to its implicit denial that anything important happened in cinema over the previous decade,[2] *Rosebud* seems designed to give aid and comfort to amateur Welles sleuths who haven't bothered to keep up with Welles scholarship over the same period. (And judging from Janet Maslin's rave in the *New York Times Book Review*, it has already fully succeeded in that endeavor.) Thus, the absence in the former book of any entries on Chantal Akerman, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Jon Jost, Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Sergei Paradjanov, Mark Rappaport, Raúl Ruiz, Béla Tarr, or Edward Yang—to cite only the first ten names that come to mind—is matched by Thomson's failure to acknowledge any of the important Welles film material that has come to light since his death (ranging from fragments to completed works), not to mention the second edition of Naremore's *Magic World*, the extensive research on and reevaluation of *It's All True* carried out by Catherine Benamou and Robert Stam, or the recent French and Spanish books cited above. Admittedly, Thomson cites Stam and praises my own Welles chronology in *This Is Orson Welles* in his bibliography, but there's no evidence in his text that he's given much thought to either. To assert, as he does of *It's All True*, that "there was never a movie there, only an extravagant, self-destructive gesture"—a judgment quoted with approval by Maslin—one either has to refute the massive counterevidence or pretend that

it doesn't exist, and Thomson characteristically settles on the latter. (The same principle of outright denial underlines Maslin's claim that Welles "cavalierly [absented] himself from the studio's drastic re-editing of *The Magnificent Ambersons*," an accurate paraphrase of Thomson at his worst.)

Both Callow and Thomson are disappointingly negligent when it comes to assessing Welles's radio work in any detail—a major subject that still awaits a critical chronicler—but only Thomson is so lazy in this regard that it leads him to make gross blunders about Welles's work as a whole. Thus *Horse Eats Hat*, one of his comedy stage productions, "reminds us on how very few occasions Orson Welles played anything strictly for laughs," a line that literally throws out dozens of radio shows. Similarly, we learn that "Nothing [of the voodoo *Macbeth*] remains but still photographs and memories"—an assertion leading to a bogus theory about Welles's attitude toward the production—which rules out the surviving newsreel footage of the play's ending (some of which can be seen in *The Battle over "Citizen Kane"*). Elsewhere, "Welles was inclined to give [*The Cradle Will Rock*] scant attention in his history of what he had done," which sounds fine until you consider that the most sustained piece of autobiography Welles ever wrote was a screenplay about that very production, which is in fact cited in Thomson's bibliography.

The problem with such gaffes is that they're typical of Thomson's text rather than exceptional; *Rosebud* is bent on demonstrating that Welles was a horrible person, incapable of loving anyone but himself, and it rarely allows facts or contrary opinions to get in its way. If Callow is neglectful and perhaps simply naïve about Welles's politics, Thomson seems to go out of his way to misrepresent them: "Welles . . . always liked his revolutionaries to be sophisticated and well-heeled," he notes at one point, cavalierly ruling out, among others, Jacaré—the central, heroic, real-life radical in the central episode of *It's All True*. But since he elsewhere characterizes the footage from this episode, dealing with Jacaré and other poor Brazilian fishermen, as "picturesque but inconsequential material," maybe it's Thomson and not Welles who likes—indeed, requires—revolutionaries to be "sophisticated and well-heeled," at least if they want to be considered consequential.

By the same token, Thomson tries to imply more than once that Welles's enthusiasm for jazz and samba and his affection for black people must add up to some form of racism: "There is sometimes a perilous proximity of old-fashioned racial stereotype and yearning sympathy," he notes on page 144—neglecting, of course, to say which times, which might require at least a smidgen of research—so that by the time he gets around to Welles playing a black man in *Othello* (on page 305), he can note that "there is no exploitation of that special racial-sexual para-

noia that Welles must have encountered with the voodoo *Macbeth*, by being in Brazil and in talks with Lena Horne." "Must have"? Are we talking now about Welles's paranoia or Thomson's? If Thomson appears to be letting Welles off the hook in the second quote, the hook in question is plainly his own invention.

Clearly it's Thomson's lack of interest in *It's All True*—a turning point in Welles's career as an independent as opposed to Hollywood filmmaker—that leads to his idiotic claim that the deleted first two reels of *The Stranger*, simply by virtue of being set in South America, are "surely . . . a reference to *It's All True*." (A comparable lack of interest leads to the greatest single flaw in Carringer's book on *Ambersons*, a study so deep in political denial that it fails to mention the title *It's All True* even once.)

Even if one faults him for laziness, one can readily excuse Thomson for such relatively common errors as his assertions that Welles's Shakespeare editions of the 30s "were only ever published by the Todd Press" (thereby ruling out Harper & Brothers's updated versions, which appeared in 1939), that "eventually Welles would make a villain and a spoilsport out of" RKO studio chief George Schaefer (contradicted sharply by my own interview with Welles, who passionately defended him throughout our meeting as a "good guy"), that Welles wanted Agnes Moorehead to play Lady Macbeth, that Patricia Medina was already married to Joseph Cotten when she played in *Mr. Arkadin* (their marriage was six years afterward), that Charlton Heston was a conservative in the 50s, that Welles's last released documentary was called *The Making of Othello* (and not *Filming Othello*), and that Welles "liked" Barbara Leaming's biography (which he helped to promote but never read). I can even forgive Thomson for chiding both Gore Vidal and me for praising *The Big Brass Ring*, an unrealized Welles script that I helped to get published and that he considers "as bad as anything Welles ever did or attempted." For Thomson, this script—which I still regard as corrosive and brilliant—is "an OW shopping list" and "one more lame try at the thriller genre." Since Thomson's critique is the first indication I've come across that *The Big Brass Ring* has anything to do with "the thriller genre," this seems about as relevant as calling *Kane* a failed musical.

What I find unforgivable about *Rosebud* is its often-voiced desire to close down Welles research altogether, apparently motivated by the sentiment that since Welles clearly never delivered a second *Kane* to Thomson's local video store, there's no point in looking for anything else in his oeuvre, including unreleased work he's never seen. "Perhaps, one day, something called Welles's *Quixote* will emerge," he writes at one point—clearly unaware that one already did emerge in Spain four years ago—and adds, "Yet I wonder if it should. . . . Its legend is tattered and complete enough. Actual screenings would be so deflating, so much less than

the thought of existence," etc. It's another way of saying, "There was never a movie there." But having seen close to three hours of edited or reedited *Quixote* footage—some of it breathtaking, much of it major Welles—I would argue that however inadequate the two-hour Spanish and English versions cobbled together in 1992 might be, this *Quixote* footage is considerably *more* exciting than the legend, and even some of the footage left out of the release version, which I've written about elsewhere (in *Persistence of Vision*, no. 11 [1995]), has to be included among Welles's most powerful and lasting achievements.

Of course, this footage doesn't have the production values of *Kane*; it was shot in total independence, out of Welles's own pocket, which means its chances of making it to Thomson's video store even in its inadequate version are fairly unlikely. So Thomson, or any potential Welles scholar, has a hard choice to make: either to travel to the Filmoteca Española in Madrid to see most of the *Quixote* footage (and to Rome, where *Quixote* editor Mauro Bonnani possesses the rest), or to stay at home and spin theories about Welles's degradation based on what hasn't been seen. If Thomson had admitted such a choice exists, he might have at least tried to justify opting for the second course of action; he didn't and hasn't—opting instead, like most passive spectators, to let the video stores determine the Welles canon, for now and for the indefinite future.

And what about the almost-finished *The Other Side of the Wind*, the feature that Welles most wanted to release when he was still alive, still kept unseen by legal and financial entanglements? Having seen most of this projected feature—calculated to confound all Welles fans whose measure of his achievement remains stuck in the 40s—I wonder what its complex and shocking reflections on machismo, homophobia, Hollywood, cinephilia, eroticism, and late-60s media, not to mention its kamikaze style, might do to someone of Thomson's tender sensibilities. Fortunately, we don't have to wait for an answer. "One day, it may be freed," he writes. "I hope not. *The Other Side of the Wind* should stay beyond reach"—for reasons comparable to his arguments about why *Quixote* should remain unseen (and why *It's All True* should continue to be viewed as an incomprehensible patchwork).

Perhaps Thomson should go further and argue for a retooling of the NEA, simply for the purpose of tracking down all remaining unreleased Welles footage and destroying it, thereby guaranteeing once and for all no future threats of disappointing his expectations or mocking his dashed Hollywood hopes. After all, we know in advance that whatever else *The Other Side of the Wind* might be, it isn't another *Citizen Kane*. Come to think of it, that's what keeps Welles so interesting.

—*Cineaste* 22, no. 3 (1996)

NOTES

1. The definitive piece of scholarship on the authorship of the *Kane* script—and sadly one of the least well known—is Robert L. Carringer's "The Scripts of *Citizen Kane*," originally published in *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 369–400, and reprinted in *Perspectives on Citizen Kane*, ed. Ronald Gottesman (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), pp. 141–71. [2002]

2. Only slightly and inadequately amended in the fourth edition. [2002]

License to Feel

Distant Voices, Still Lives and *The Neon Bible*

I

An autobiographical film about growing up in a Catholic working-class family in Liverpool in the 40s and 50s. Achronological glimpses of a traumatic family life, with particular emphasis on a funeral and two weddings. A collection of radio shows and nostalgic songs sung at parties and pub gatherings. A highly condensed, triple-distilled family album of faces and feelings organized around a few key locations. A series of emotional and visceral jolts whose brute power and intensity could not be conveyed by a conventional linear story. A seamless, passionate block of memories defined by the beauty and terror of the everyday.

The problem with all these descriptions of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* is that, as partially accurate as each one of them may be, they can only dance around the periphery of a primal experience that reinvents filmgoing itself. They represent the shards of several attempts to get at the essence of a masterpiece that I saw twice at the Toronto Film Festival last September, and twice again earlier this month, and their inadequacy is largely due to the fact that great films have a way of imposing their own laws and definitions that ordinary descriptions can't reach.

Take the word "autobiographical," for instance, which usually implies that the author is the central character. Terence Davies, the filmmaker, who was born in 1945, doesn't represent himself in the film at all, and while I'm told that he was the youngest in a family of nine children, the Davies family in the film has only two daughters and a son. But the photograph of the father on the living room wall—a pivotal reference point—is a photograph of Davies' father, not of the actor who plays him.

Or consider the word "achronological." The emphasis of emotional continuity over narrative continuity that is the hallmark of several films directed by Alain Resnais (including *Hiroshima, mon amour*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Je t'aime, je t'aime*, and *Providence*) is certainly present here, but at the same time the overall film is structured around a certain narrative progression. The first part, "Distant Voices," pivots around the funeral of the father (Pete Postlethwaite) and the wedding of the older sister, Eileen (Angela Walsh), both during the early 50s. It also includes memories of an air raid during World War II (when Eileen as a

child is ordered by her father in an underground shelter to sing something, and she responds with the "Beer Barrel Polka," gradually joined by all the others) and ends with the birth and baptism of Eileen's first child. The second part, "Still Lives," carries us through the wedding of the younger sister, Maisie (Lorraine Ashbourne) and ends with the wedding of Tony (Dean Williams), the youngest of the three siblings.

It's also worth pointing out that the film's two parts actually constitute two separate films from a production standpoint—both of them produced by the British Film Institute in conjunction with England's Channel 4. "Distant Voices" was shot over four weeks (in London and Liverpool) in the fall of 1985, and "Still Lives" was shot over four weeks exactly two years later; the aging of the cast during the interim is often visible and adds appreciably to the overall sense one has of the passage of time.

Stylistically, the two parts form a coherent whole, apart from the frequent use in the second part of fade-outs to white. Both sections were processed in the lab in a highly distinctive manner that left the silver nitrate in the print and desaturated the colors in order to emphasize textures; the same process was used in *1984* to emphasize greys and blues, but Davies employed various filters and gels in order to highlight the browns; he further implemented this strategy by employing only period costumes that didn't feature primary colors.

The film opens with the sound of thunder and rain followed by a radio announcer giving a weather report; then we see a frontal shot of the Davies house in the rain, and the mother opening the front door to collect three bottles of milk. In a closer frontal shot inside the house, she calls up the front stairway to her three children to come down to breakfast ("It's seven o'clock"), then returns a moment later to call them again; the camera remains fixed on the empty stairway while we hear the footsteps and voices of Tony, Maisie, and Eileen coming down, but without seeing them. A woman's offscreen, unaccompanied voice begins to sing "I Get the Blues When It's Raining" as the camera slowly moves forward, then turns right and makes a 180-degree pan to the closed front door, and the sound of the rain outside starts up again.

There's a dissolve to the same front door, now open to clear weather, and a hearse slowly pulling up in front (as we soon discover, it's about ten years later), and another offscreen, unaccompanied female voice begins to sing "There's a Man Goin' Round Takin' Names." This continues over a dissolve to the same children, now grown—standing as if in a pose for a portrait in the living room, in front of a photograph of the father that the camera slowly approaches as the figures in the foreground step away.

Another shot shows the four members of the family entering the hearse, followed by a dissolve to the same family posing again, in the same spot, this time for Eileen's wedding. Over the sound of rain again, Eileen says, "I wish me dad was here," to which Maisie replies, "*I* don't." There's an offscreen aural flashback to a quarrel between Maisie and her father about her wanting to go to a dance, a quarrel that a moment later we see as well as hear: Maisie is scrubbing the floor in the cellar, and the brief scene ends abruptly with the father tossing coins on the floor and then beating her with a broom.

Nothing in the above summary can convey the weight, the flow, or the impact of these sounds and images, which create a world of their own that is so self-sufficient and distinct from other film experiences that it is impossible to say whether this sequence—or any subsequent ones in the film—proceeds quickly or slowly. We all know that "real time" and "film time" aren't the same thing, but the emotional time of recollection that this film works with is so singular that it doesn't seem to bear a very close relationship to what we ordinarily mean by either of these temporal registers. The film as a whole lasts only 85 minutes, but the density that it conveys is more nearly that of a three-hour epic.

English kitchen-sink realism is not a mode for which I harbor much affection, and while there might be some academic relationship between *Distant Voices, Still Lives* and such hallmarks of that mode as *This Sporting Life*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *A Taste of Honey*, and *Georgy Girl*, I think that such a comparison winds up confusing a lot more than it clarifies. "Technically" speaking, Davies' film is closer to the avant-garde, but its emotional impact bears more relationship to directors like John Ford, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Charlie Chaplin (whose *Limelight* theme is played by Tony on the harmonica), Kenji Mizoguchi, and Leo McCarey than to any experimental or realist contemporaries of Davies that come to mind.

It also isn't surprising to learn that Davies loves Hollywood musicals and that a shot of black umbrellas in the rain in front of a movie theater in "Still Lives" is included as a specific homage to *Singin' in the Rain*, the first film he ever saw. (The same shot pans up to posters advertising *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* and *Guys and Dolls*, and the following shot is a pan across a large audience watching the former movie—the tear-jerking theme song is heard offscreen—that finally settles on the weirdly lit figures of Maisie and Eileen, sobbing uncontrollably.)

For all its credentials as an independent British feature, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* ultimately harks back to an era in Hollywood filmmaking when strong emotions could be expressed and elicited more directly, without shame, and the role of music throughout the film—not only the offscreen songs cited above but also the countless songs sung by the major characters at parties and in the local

pub, which command a surprisingly yet justifiably large amount of the film's attention—remains firmly within this tradition.

For this reason, I strongly disagree with several critics who have tried to draw some parallel between Davies' use of period pop songs and the ironic musical excursions in works by Dennis Potter such as *Pennies from Heaven* and *The Singing Detective*, which use these touchstones in a virtually antithetical way. Potter's jaundiced attitude toward these songs is that they're basically lies, and he uses them to point up their falsity in relation to the wretched lives of his characters. The bitterness and defeatism of his vision, which can be directly linked to attitudes associated with the 70s and 80s, is not very far from the positions assumed toward soap-opera material by Douglas Sirk in the 50s and by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the 70s—a form of cynicism that can only deal with strong emotions and sentimentality by placing them (implicitly in Sirk, explicitly in Fassbinder) inside quotation marks.

Davies' attitude toward strong emotions and sentimentality is much closer to the attitudes of Chaplin and McCarey, regarding them as authentic and even indispensible tools for understanding and dealing with life. This can be seen during the sequence when Davies' use of a pop song is superficially closest to Potter's. It begins with one of the daughters as a little girl watching her mother seated on a second-story window sill while washing the outside panes of the window. Then there's a cut to a reverse angle of the mother washing the same panes from inside the house, and as the camera slowly tracks toward her, we hear Ella Fitzgerald singing her dreamy version of "Taking a Chance on Love" on the sound track. The song continues over an abrupt jump cut to the father grabbing the mother downstairs, dragging her to the right of the front stairway, and beating her to the floor (out of frame), repeatedly screaming "Shut up!" in responses to her cries of pain. Then, as the song continues to the end of the chorus, there is another jump cut to the mother's bruised face in profile, with a slow pan down to her bruised arm as she polishes the furniture.

If the same action and the same recording were used in a Potter film, it seems likely that the Ella Fitzgerald record would be heard only *after* the mother's beating and that the mother would lip-sync the lyrics—that is, the ironic truth of the song's lyrics ("Here I go again . . .") would be used to ridicule both the pathos of the mother's predicament and the inadequacy of those lyrics in dealing with that predicament. But Davies clearly loves the song as well as his mother and uses the record as a hymn to her courage and endurance—a hymn that in no way reduces the unbearable harshness of the beating and that still allows us to hear the song's lyrics in an ironic fashion without leading us to feel any contempt for them or for the feelings that they represent. It is an extraordinary moment, and

without trying to suggest that this comparison necessarily invalidates Potter's gallows humor when he uses similar materials, I think it can be argued that the sheer rawness and power of the emotions expressed here by Davies are outside of Potter's range.

As can be seen from the above example, Davies' sympathy and empathy rest more with the women in the film than with the men—a fact that is spelled out further during all the pub scenes in "Still Lives," when the marriages of Eileen, Maisie, and their friend Micky register as the tragic curtailments of their solidarity with one another and the innocence represented by many of the songs that they sing for and with one another—songs that include not only such white-bread standbys as "Buttons and Bows," "That Old Gang of Mine," and "Bye-Bye Blackbird," but also such ethnic favorites as "My Yiddisher Momma," "When Irish Eyes Are Smilin'," and "Brown-Skinned Girls." Implicitly, the husbands of Eileen, Maisie, and their friends are perceived as somewhat muted variations of the father. ("They're all the same," Micky remarks at one point; "when they're not usin' the big stick, they're fartin' ").

Perhaps for this reason, it must be admitted that "Still Lives" does not put the viewer through quite as exhausting an emotional workout as "Distant Voices"; once the father dies, something goes out of the film. This doesn't prevent the latter half of the film from having peaks and revelations of its own—the protracted leave-taking after Tony's wedding party, which concludes the film, is one of the loveliest sequences I've seen anywhere—but the tone is less brittle and searing, more elegaic and stately. I'm reminded that the virtual climaxes of two other masterpieces—the ball sequence in *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Judy Garland's "The Man That Got Away" number in *A Star Is Born*—occur quite early in both films, and the remainder of the story in each case is largely composed of thematic recollections of that emotional peak.

The sheer pleasure shown by the women (and occasionally the men) while they're performing their songs throughout Davies' film make these moments into exquisite, sustained epiphanies—stretches of unabashed delight that are totally unlike the kinds of enjoyment we can find in recent commercial movies. We all go to movies for pleasure, and it appears that more people are going to movies this summer than ever before; but how often do we see people enjoying themselves *in* these movies? (I except the Joker getting kicks from his media crimes and mayhem in *Batman*, and a few moments of manic glee experienced by Steve Martin's character on a Little League field in *Parenthood*.)

I'm not just thinking of Batman's melancholia, James Bond's bitterness, or Indiana Jones's frustrations. I'm also thinking of the catalogues of physical and/or

emotional punishment that are meted out to the characters in the course of *The Abyss*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Karate Kid Part II*, *Lethal Weapon 2*, *Lock Up*, *Nightmare on Elm Street 5*, *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills*, *Turner & Hooch*, *Uncle Buck*, *Weekend at Bernie's*, and *When Harry Met Sally . . .*—the sort of movies that the media ceaselessly informs us are supposed to matter much more than the others.

I'm not trying to deny that the characters in Davies' film suffer a great deal as well; indeed, one believes in their suffering in a way that one clearly doesn't believe in the assorted woes of the characters in the other movies. But given the hype that one receives daily about how much "fun" the aforementioned Hollywood features are supposed to be—and the bias on the part of this culture that "art films" like *Distant Voices, Still Lives* are supposed to be dreary yet vaguely edifying experiences, rather like castor oil—it's amazing how little real and sustained pleasure we're allowed to witness in the former movies, and how much we're allowed to see and share with Davies' people—how much, in fact, we're able to luxuriate in their fleeting yet ecstatic happiness—in spite of all their grief. The sheer physicality of their songs, their laughter, their smiles, and even on occasion their tears makes one feel grateful to be alive; by contrast, even some of the more exciting moments in *Indiana Jones* and *Batman* make one feel like an invalid on sedation getting jolts of electroshock.

There's nothing intellectual about Davies' approach to his characters, and no analytical grids are placed over them, although the usual restriction of the action to a handful of recurring locations—mainly the Davies housefront, the front stairway, the living room, the children's upstairs bedroom, the stable where the father works, a hospital ward, the local Catholic church, and the nearby pub—circumscribes our glimpses of them within only a few special areas, which intensifies the film's highly elliptical manner. The area just outside the front door of the Davies house, for instance, generally represents a space of provisional escape or respite, where Eileen, Maisie, Micky, and another friend, Jingles, go to smoke cigarettes and chew the fat, where other family members go during parties to get a breath of fresh air, or where, during the day, the mother briefly babysits with a grandchild in a baby buggy. The film regards this zone as a kind of privileged site—not quite the world outside the house, but still free of the sense of confinement inside.

It is where we see Tony alone, inexplicably crying after his wedding—one of the many events in the film that are made to seem complete despite their lack of narrative explanations or any framing context. Another is Tony's apparently going AWOL as a soldier in order to come home and angrily confront his father—an

event that begins with his smashing the front window with his fist and ends with him being arrested by MPs and winding up in military prison; we're never told what occasions this incident, and it's part of the film's brilliance that we don't feel deprived by this lack of information.

Perhaps the film's unerring sense of what is essential and what is not can partially be traced back to its budgetary restrictions—a sense of monetary economy that produces formal economy, an attitude that is reflected in the work of other independent film makers (from Mark Rappaport to Peter Greenaway to Jim Jarmusch to Steven Soderbergh) and that most Hollywood filmmakers could learn a lot from. The most extreme instance of this economy yields one of the film's most striking shots—an overhead shot that shows Tony and Eileen's husband, George, falling simultaneously and in slow motion through adjacent sections of the same skylight. After one of the Toronto screenings, Davies explained that he needed to show both Tony and George suffering industrial accidents that land them in the hospital (we learn from the subsequent dialogue that George fell from a scaffold but aren't given any account of Tony's accident); he didn't have enough money to shoot both of these accidents, so he wound up combining them in a single accident and shot.

Davies' explanation may sound capricious, but in fact this is far from being the only nonrealistic shot in the film; the film's emotional continuity grants him an enormous stylistic freedom, and he takes full advantage of it without ever compromising his vision. Just as many incidents are conveyed without narrative explanation, certain others have a hallucinatory power that suggest they might represent dreams rather than literal events, and here again Davies' grip on his subject is so sure and absolute that no sense of loss or confusion results from this lack of clarification. One of the strongest sequences begins with Eileen, after her wedding, sobbing in her husband's arms in the pub and crying, "I want me dad!" A slow pan to the left gradually leads us into darkness, and then, without any apparent break, across a candlelit church interior where the family is praying; this dissolves into a lovely tracking shot moving in the same direction past a row of houses at Christmastime, accompanied by choral music, that finally ends in front of the Davies house, where we see the father dressing the Christmas tree inside. He says goodnight to his children (it is now years earlier than the scene in the pub), sees them all sleeping together in one bed, says quietly, "God bless, kids," and attaches a stocking to their bedpost. We next see the whole family praying at their Christmas dinner, and the father, sitting at the head of the table, starts to shake uncontrollably; then, in a single motion, he pulls off the tablecloth and all the dishes with it and yells, "Hey! Clear this up!"

The nightmarish finality and brutality of this last shot, so contradictory in

relation to everything in the sequence that precedes it, registers as a shock but not precisely as a stylistic rupture. Because everything that we see and hear has the shape and feel of events sifted through memory, there is a chilling congruence between all of the shots and events, and while the source of this final shot may be either an actual incident or a nightmare, it ultimately makes no difference—the effect and meaning are literally the same.

An equally creepy (if funnier) moment occurs when Maisie and her husband, Dave, are having dinner together in the Davies house while the radio is on. Suddenly the door opens slightly, and a man who looks very much like the father, dead for many years, appears with a candle, turns out the light, says (in a singsong drone), "I switched the light off—I don't know whether I'm doing right or wrong," and promptly leaves. When Dave asks Maisie who the hell *that* was, she explains it's her Uncle Ted (and, in fact, a look at the cast list shows that Uncle Ted is played by another actor, Carl Chase, not by Pete Postlethwaite, who plays the father). A moment later, we see Uncle Ted and his candle being intercepted at the foot of the front stairs by the mother, who says chidingly, "Teddy, stop acting soft!" and blows the candle out, leaving us in darkness. It's a delightfully macabre moment that never fails to get a laugh from the audience.

I haven't the faintest idea what this scene actually signifies—its meaning is obviously lost somewhere in the dark recesses of the Davies family folklore—but its musical and plastic articulation as a piece of filmmaking is so irreproachably right that it communicates its impact as directly and as beautifully as a perfect line of poetry. It is impossible for me to imagine Davies' film without it, or it being realized any differently than it is here. Musically or dramatically speaking, it is nothing more than a brief, frivolous interlude, a moment of comic relief. But the awesome strength of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* as a whole is that it makes every moment necessary and indelible as well as beautiful. I have every reason to believe that, years from now, when practically every other new movie that's currently playing in Chicago is long forgotten, it will be remembered and treasured as one of the greatest of all English films.

II

Two paradoxical facts about Terence Davies first film adaptation:

1. It follows fairly closely *The Neon Bible*, a novel written by John Kennedy Toole for a literary contest in the mid-50s, when he was sixteen—a decade before he finished work on his second novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and about fifteen years before he, still unpublished, committed suicide (*A Confederacy of Dunces*

was published ten years later, *The Neon Bible* ten years after that). I don't care much for *The Neon Bible*, a hackneyed mood piece set in a rural backwater of the Deep South, but I think the movie, which seems 100 percent Davies, is wonderful.

2. Of all the English-speaking films shown at Cannes last May, the two that got the most boorish and least comprehending reception by the English-speaking press were *The Neon Bible* and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, though for nearly opposite reasons. Jarmusch, who's long been criticized for coasting along, in *Down by Law*, *Mystery Train*, and *Night on Earth*, on the same kind of hip humor he virtually invented for *Stranger Than Paradise*, finally broke free and did something bold, original, political, dark, scary, outspoken, witty, and often beautiful—a black-and-white western that should be opening here sometime next month. But because he dared to criticize this country, a sizable portion of the American press—which didn't even seem to be consciously aware of this criticism—either scratched its head or sneered to cover its bafflement. (By contrast, *Dead Man* has been well received in Japan and much of Europe, where a relatively straightforward presentation of this country's violence, ignorance, and overall dementia doesn't create the same problems.)

Davies, an Englishman born in 1945, shot for the first time in 'Scope, in a country and culture different from his own, and his film is a faithful adaptation of someone else's material, set in a period that precedes Davies' autobiographical *Distant Voices, Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, and starring Gena Rowlands, an actress whose methods have little in common with those of anyone he's ever worked with before. And what did the American press complain about? That *The Neon Bible* was a carbon copy of Davies' two previous films.

I suppose it could be argued that Davies' capacity to make something at once completely different from and exactly the same as his earlier work is a rather uncommon achievement—shared perhaps with Yasujiro Ozu and Howard Hawks at various points in their careers, but not with many others. *The Neon Bible* may not qualify as a masterpiece, as *Distant Voices, Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes* do, but it contains moments and achievements that are as impressive as anything Davies has ever done—and to have done this with alien material makes his achievement even more remarkable.

One of the principal things Davies and Toole seem to have in common as artists is something negative—a lack of distinction as storytellers. In their relatively mature works (Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Davies' films from *Distant Voices, Still Lives* on) they're both masters of set pieces who have trouble getting from one to the next; the kind of graceful narrative flow that might connect such passages into a seamless larger form is foreign to them. Yet stasis rather than narrative development is basic to what both artists can do best. In Toole's case, it's

a talent for defining character and life itself as a kind of quagmire from which nothing and no one escapes—a talent that focused mainly on morose, passive suffering and deprivation in *The Neon Bible* and turned to satire (most of it liberal-bashing) in *A Confederacy of Dunces.* (Given the enormous differences between the two novels, it's worth entertaining the hypothesis that *The Neon Bible* was written by Toole's flamboyant mother, now also dead; it certainly doesn't read like the work of either a sixteen-year-old boy or the New Orleans disciple of Alexander Pope who would write *A Confederacy of Dunces.*)

This gravitation toward stasis is related to a capacity to reproduce or evoke states of pure feeling connected to intense childhood memories. If you've seen *Distant Voices, Still Lives* or *The Long Day Closes* you know what to expect in *The Neon Bible*: stretched-out meditative moments in which nothing in particular happens except on the sound track (a radio speech by FDR, an episode from *Gang Busters*); community rituals, such as church meetings, tent revivals, and such everyday events as people walking down the street to church or the train station; and short, awkward bursts of dialogue or dramatic action that usually serve as mortar for these extended blocks of material.

Roughly speaking, the time span covered in *The Neon Bible* (the movie) is the late 30s through the mid-40s. Toole was born in 1937, Davies in 1945, and David, the lead character (played at the age of ten by Drake Bell and at fifteen by Jacob Tierney), seems to have been born in the late 20s or early 30s. So neither novelist nor filmmaker can be said to be reproducing his own childhood precisely.

Being two years older than Davies and having grown up only a state away from Georgia, where the movie is set and was filmed, I feel reasonably qualified to comment on the overall accuracy of Davies' details of place and period: it's astonishing in how many ways he gets them right. Clearly the man did his homework, though his achievement may have as much to do with taste as it does with research because the details themselves sometimes count for less than the kind of boxes in which they're placed—the subjective memory enclosing them. Davies' use of 'Scope places a frame of 50s expansiveness—a memory of mid-50s CinemaScope that Davies and I happen to share—around the late 30s and 40s details that makes them a good deal more exciting because they become memories within memories: the late 30s and 40s as they might have been remembered by someone during the 50s.

The story, such as it is, is recounted in flashbacks by the sixteen-year-old narrator-hero, David, as he sits alone in a train compartment at night, looking out the window at the dark countryside; it has to do with the deterioration of his father, Frank (Denis Leary), after he loses his factory job (he becomes a wife beater), and then of his mother, Sarah (Diana Scarwid), after Frank goes overseas to fight in Italy and is killed in action (she gradually goes mad). The other family

member, David's favorite, is Aunt Mae (Rowlands), a former nightclub singer who moves in when she has nowhere else to go, although Frank thoroughly disapproves of her. David is closer to the two women than he is to Frank, which evokes the psychosexual atmosphere of Davies' two previous features.

There are many echoes here of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with Mae taking on the flamboyant, promiscuous style of Blanche Dubois and Sarah taking on her eventual madness, and Frank becoming a brute like Stanley Kowalski. (These echoes are fully present in the novel.) Perhaps an equivalent influence on Davies is the movie *The Night of the Hunter* and its arsenal of neoprimitive, childlike imagery and rural, homespun folk poetry—its starry skies and oversized moon, its troubled Christianity, its lyricized and almost generic treatment of madness, its period street scenes that remind you of magazine ads for hair tonic and talcum powder.

So much for story and characters, which ultimately count for little here beyond a pretext for generating luminous scenes and moments—among others, Rowlands singing "My Romance" and "How Long Has This Been Going On?" (imperfectly but very potently) with a jazz combo; Frank and David attending a Ku Klux Klan rally (a brief scene with no counterpart in the novel, and one of Davies' more inspired additions); the whole family attending a revival meeting (a beautifully realized sequence, including the moment when evangelist Bobbie Lee Taylor, played by Leo Burmester, briefly surveys the audience and murmurs, "Good crowd, good money"); the first genuinely artistic use of morphing I've seen (which has David growing from age ten to fifteen in a matter of seconds); a bunch of graduating junior-high students singing "Dixie" exactly the way you'd expect them to; and the film's gorgeous concluding shot of a train crossing the countryside in early dawn, framed against an enormous sky of varying gradations of blue, gray, orange, and pink—an extended shot that actually occasioned some walkouts by journalists at Cannes, one of whom said to me, "I get the point already."

If "getting the point"—which I assume means the narrative point—of certain shots is your main reason for sitting through them, I suspect *The Neon Bible* isn't going to be your cup of tea. Davies doesn't offer a cinema of plot or a cinema of ideas, but a cinema of raw feelings and incandescent moments that wash over you like waves. You might find some of these waves boring if you assume that each one has to make a separate point to justify its existence. Theoretically, I suppose one could turn off a recording of a performance by John Coltrane for the same reason; if you're not hypnotized by and ultimately grateful for the bounty that's being delivered, you're probably better off somewhere else.

When a friend and fellow film buff once insisted to me that Terrence Malick's 1978 *Days of Heaven* was a great film, I skeptically asked her why—acknowl-

edging that Malick's only previous feature, *Badlands* (1973), was an awesome achievement, but feeling that its successor was patchy at best. Her only explanation was to cite a single shot that occurs quite early in the film: Linda (Linda Manz), the narrator, is fleeing the industrial inferno of 1916 Chicago with her older brother and his girlfriend (Richard Gere and Brooke Adams). We briefly see the three of them running toward a train in a railway yard to the sound of guitar music, and Linda says offscreen, "In fact all three of us been goin' places, lookin' for things, searchin' for things . . ." She pauses and there's a sudden cut to an astonishingly beautiful shot of a train in the distance against a cloud-strewn sky, moving from right to left over an elevated bridge, trailing plumes of black smoke. Linda continues, " . . . goin' on adventures."

The shock of that cut and the sublime, lyrical jolt it gives the movie as a whole—a jolt that's at once musical and painterly in its precise articulation—may or may not suffice to make *Days of Heaven* great (and it isn't the only remarkable shot by any means). Still, it's easy to see what my friend meant. Take *Apollo 13*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Dead Man Walking*, and six others of this year's Oscar winners, and I doubt you'll find a hint of that kind of aesthetic liftoff anywhere. There are many such fleeting poetic moments in *The Neon Bible*—moments so ecstatic that you may feel yourself rising off your seat. And if much of the rest of the movie tends to be clunky as narrative, that's a small price to pay for pieces of enlightenment you can happily carry around inside your head for months.

The first such epiphany occurs quite early in the movie—as early as that shot of the train in *Days of Heaven*—when David says, "There was no snow—no, not that year." As he delivers the line, the 'Scope frame becomes a diptych: on the left is an empty porch topped by icicles framing an enchanted snowfall, all clean verticals and horizontals; on the right is a lit interior where ten-year-old David is playing on the floor, all fuzzy warmth and roundness. These two images combine with David's narration to produce a single jolt that calls to mind the hallucinatory effect of a Joseph Cornell box, as if to prove that what this whole movie is about is what's happening inside someone's head. If one stops to ask whether it actually snowed that year, the power of the jolt contained in that shot—combining objective and subjective experience in a manner that defies analysis—is to verify that yes, it did, and no, it didn't. (Indeed, part of the power inherent in any Cornell box as a surrealist construction rests in the primitive, obsessive fetishism that decrees that every treasured object becomes at once totemic and sacred in its fresh context.)

In another such moment in *The Neon Bible*—one that's no less mysterious—the camera slowly approaches a large white bedsheet hanging on a clothesline until the wind-rippled sheet fills the entire 'Scope frame, while all that one hears on the sound track is the opening theme music of *Gone with the Wind*. My

description of this moment, like my descriptions of the other magically charged and highly condensed film moments above, can give you no sense whatsoever of the emotional power it carries—though if the concept behind it mattered more than its realization, it probably wouldn't register as strongly. As long as Davies delivers such moments, I couldn't care less how adept he is at telling stories—just as I don't care whether Gena Rowlands can carry a tune. As LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) wrote in the 60s, defending John Coltrane against charges of being undisciplined, "It's like calling Sonny Liston a sloppy boxer. It won't get you anywhere. Because you have to make the remark from a prone position."

—*Chicago Reader*, August 18, 1989, and April 5, 1996

Death and Life

Landscapes of the Soul—
The Cinema of Alexander Dovzhenko

> When I speak of poetry, I am not thinking of it as a genre. Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality. . . . Think of Mandelstam, think of Pasternak, Chaplin, Dovzhenko, Mizoguchi, and you'll realize what tremendous emotional power is carried by these exalted figures who soar above the earth, in whom the artist appears not just as an explorer of life, but as one who creates great spiritual treasures and that specific beauty which is subject only to poetry. Such an artist can discern the lines of the poetic design of being. He is capable of going beyond the limitations of coherent logic, and conveying the deep complexity and truth of the impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life.
>
> —Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (1987)

> It is possible that we are still in a pre-historic stage of cinema, for the great history of cinema will begin when it leaves the frame of ordinary artistic representation and grows into a tremendous and extraordinarily encompassing perceptive category.
>
> —Alexander Dovzhenko, 1933

If I could describe adequately the genius of Alexander Dovzhenko in terms of a strictly linear argument, I'd give it a shot, but I know when I'm licked. Conceivably the most neglected major filmmaker of the twentieth century, the Ukrainian writer-director has never come close to receiving his due, in this country or elsewhere, in large part because his fervent, pantheistic, folkloric films develop more like lyric poems, moving from one stanza to the next, than they do like narratives, proceeding by way of paragraphs or chapters. The world they describe is one of Gogolesque horses that sing or reprimand their owners, noble cows, glistening meadows, wily cossacks, dancing peasants, declamatory speeches by wild-eyed individuals, sunflowers in sunny close-ups alongside noble women with similarly open faces, vast reaches of empty sky over fields of waving wheat—a vision of a natural order that paradoxically seems both brutal and harmonious, primitive landscapes bursting with interactive animal and vegetal life. One calls this poetry in part because it comprises a paean to sheer existence, singing about rather than relating or recounting what it sees. But if satire is what closes in New Haven, we all know that lyric poetry doesn't even open.

All of Dovzhenko's major films have events (in the wild montage flurries of *Arsenal*, they're virtually nonstop), and some of these events are not only explosive but literally explosions; but the degree to which all of them *are* events—and explosive events—is far more important. Events aren't consumable in the same way that narratives are because they tend to confuse and confound us by their very nature as blunt encounters, splintering experience and then meting it out to us in separate clusters rather than allowing it the kind of coherence that can only come from the continuity, logical progression, and cohesion of storytelling.

Out of the dozen Dovzhenko films showing at the Gene Siskel Film Center this month—more Dovzhenko films than have ever showed in Chicago before, and possibly more than will ever show here again—at least four are jaw-dropping masterpieces, made consecutively over a mere six years: *Arsenal* (1929), *Earth* (1930), *Ivan* (1932), and *Aerograd* (1935). It's regrettable that each of the silent films in this retrospective, including *Arsenal* and *Earth*, is showing only once. But it's also understandable given the usually small turnouts for silent films as well as the cost of hiring a pianist for each showing.

In some ways, a silent-film syntax, including a bold use of intertitles, persists in Dovzhenko's work up through *Michurin*, though it would be wrong to conclude that this makes any of his sound films old-fashioned in relation to their own periods. *Ivan* and *Aerograd* are anything but silent films with added music and sound effects; the first resembles a kind of orchestral suite, divided into six numbered sections, while the second is clearly operatic, with the sound of plane engines used as functionally as voices.

There are also astonishing things in both *Zvenigora* (1927)—which Dovzhenko once called "a catalog of all my creative possibilities"—and *Shchors* (1939), which has a remarkable opening, though I'd hesitate to place them in the same league as the other four. But don't imagine that you can get the measure of any of these films without seeing a 35-millimeter print on a big screen, a rare opportunity afforded only by this series. (Only a couple are readily available in any other way—a good print of *Arsenal* with a good score on video, a mediocre print of *Earth* with a bad score on video and DVD.)

Are they propaganda films? Yes and no; in many ways, not counting the wartime documentaries, Dovzhenko makes that category seem close to meaningless. They were all made in part for propaganda purposes but failed more often than not to carry out those objectives. Most of them are no less clearly avant-garde films financed by state money, and this was bound to make some bureaucrats furious. *Earth*, a film about the arrival of collectivized farming in a Ukrainian village, was received so poorly in the early 30s that Dovzhenko's father was thrown out of a collective farm as a consequence, and *Ivan* might have gotten his son into even more trouble.

There are three separate characters named Ivan in *Ivan*—a celebration of the building of a huge dam on the Dnieper River that never even bothers to show us the completed dam itself. One of these Ivans has a gruff, illiterate father (Stepan Shkurat) who's an unapologetic slacker and a hilarious bullshit artist. He spends his time idly fishing from the same construction site where everybody else is working their butts off; he boasts directly to the camera about how contemptuous he is of the very notion of labor, brandishing the back of his neck for all of us to see. There's no question that the film adores this old coot more than anyone else in the picture. And later, when we see a Soviet army marching, the sky is so vast and the soldiers so tiny, crawling across the lower rim of the screen like bugs, that it's hard to know exactly what's being extolled. If this is propaganda, we need to ask on behalf of what.

Dovzhenko was born in 1894 in a town by the Desna River, the son of an illiterate Ukrainian cossack farmer who also had to work as a driver and pitch-burner to feed his family. Alexander had thirteen siblings and only one of them survived, a sister who became a doctor. "I still cannot bear to look at funerals," he wrote in the 30s, "and yet they pass through all my scripts and all my pictures, for the question of life and death affected my imagination when I was still a child and left its imprint on all my work." Having just seen or reseen half a dozen of his films, I consider this an understatement, because I can't think of any other filmmaker who has dealt as comprehensively, as beautifully, and as profoundly with death—or who has, for the same reasons, so many things to say about what it means to be alive.

I'm thinking of a man in *Arsenal* missing half his teeth, blackened by smoke, attacked by laughing gas on the battlefront, and laughing hysterically while a corpse nearby is seen grinning in a hideous rictus. I'm also thinking of the blissfully peaceful and contented death of the grandfather in harmony with rural nature—a loving portrait of Dovzhenko's own grandfather—that occurs near the beginning of *Earth*, and the woman in the same film who tears off all her clothes in hysterical grief when her boyfriend is shot; of the worker in *Ivan* who falls to his death during the dam construction (an event signaled by a plume of black smoke) because of poor planning, followed by a remarkable montage of his protesting mother rushing through ten bureaucratic doors in quick succession; of the many deaths between fierce antagonists in a Siberian forest (some of them prefaced by the equivalent of arias) in *Aerograd*, his first film made outside his native Ukraine; and of the death of the title hero's wife in *Michurin* (1948), occasioning one of the only bursts of raw (as opposed to "approved") emotion in that film. This is far from being an exhaustive list of the ways death is depicted in Dovzhenko's work, but it begins to suggest some of the affective range.

By the time he was twenty, he was working as a science teacher, and, by his own account, when the 1917 Russian Revolution came, though he hadn't yet heard of Karl Marx he was "happy as a dog let off a chain, sincerely believing that now all men were brothers, that everything was completely clear; that the peasants had the land, the workers had the factories . . . the Ukrainians had Ukraine, the Russians had Russia; that the next day the whole world would find out about this and, struck with our vision, would do likewise."[1]

When he started making his own movies in 1928—after a brief stint as a highly skillful and inventive commercial director (see his 1926 slapstick comedy *Love Berry* and his 1927 thriller *Diplomatic Pouch*)—they were in part the ecstatic expressions of a sometime painter, cartoonist, and diplomat who still felt that way. But they were also tragic reflections on the prices that have to be paid for any revolutionary change, inflected by moments of turmoil, anguish, and even horror. Thanks to such intensity, there are few films anywhere that are more exalted and passionate in their feelings for people. The late film historian Jay Leyda, who met Dovzhenko in Moscow in 1934, recalls him reading aloud his script of *Aerograd:* "His voice, as powerful and convincing as I imagined Mayakovsky's must have been, filled his hotel room to the bursting point. . . . When I later watched him work at Mosfilm I saw that his relation to actors was to infect them with his immense enthusiasm in the same way that he swept me off my feet with his reading."

Some of the reasons why we've been unable to see Dovzhenko are inextricably tied to reasons why we can and should see as much of him as we can before he disappears from history and memory entirely, and why we owe it to ourselves as well as our successors to do so. The challenges and rewards of lyric poetry have already been mentioned; five other reference points I'd like to stress here are the cold war, colonialism, urbanism, a belief in the future, and portraiture—subjects that offer in each case an invitation to appreciating his work as well as a potential obstacle.

It seems inevitable that the cold war and its legacy would prevent us from seeing any Soviet filmmaker clearly, just as it decisively prevented any Soviet filmmaker, Dovzhenko included, from seeing us. Dovzhenko's unfinished final film, the 1950 *Farewell America*, is stridently kitschy anti-American propaganda in chromolike color that was essentially instigated as well as halted by Stalin, then "completed" only seven years ago with documentary material about its making and unmaking.

If it were less campy and more accomplished as entertainment, *Farewell America* might qualify as a sort of anti-*Ninotchka*, the reverse of Lubistch's anticommu-

nist comedy with Greta Garbo. Instead it's a grimly fascinating demonstration of how grotesque communist misreadings of Americans matched certain of our own clichéd notions about "Ruskies" during the same period. Yet the paranoia of that era certainly seeps through the plot details here about bugging—reminding me of the sole afternoon I spent in the communist world, East Berlin in 1990, when the most striking difference with West Berlin, instantly apparent in every café and bar I visited, was the sudden drop in volume level, none of the voices ever rising above murmurs. Given the limited choices available within such a climate (roughly comparable to those of the Hollywood blacklist, or those that might pertain today for incarcerated black males or indefinitely detained Middle Eastern suspects), the worst thing that can be said of *Farewell America* is that not even the on-screen "expert" who recounts the story of Dovzhenko preparing and partially shooting and editing it (eight versions of the script, half as many drafts of the cutting continuity) knows whether his work on the film was sincere or hypocritical, and we soon come to the horrible realization that it makes no difference anyway.

To a lesser extent, we may also find ourselves in the dark about Dovzhenko's precise relation to his material in *Michurin* (1948)—a film that provides the missing link between the very personal operatic grandiloquence of *Aerograd* and the anonymous opera buffa style of *Farewell America*. When he concludes one sequence of this color biopic about a famous botanist, a film celebrating agriculture, with an exalted shot of an electrical tower, is this a heartfelt or sarcastic detail? On the face of it, this sort of poker-faced platitude makes bad Stalinist art look worse than bad Hollywood of the same period—even if the patchy appearance of *Michurin* periodically suggests the protracted retooling of a Howard Hughes opus like *Jet Pilot* (which took even longer to complete) during roughly the same period—but this may only be because we're better equipped to read the nuances of Hollywood junk. (We certainly know that with directors working under either Hughes or Stalin, there was more interference when the big shot took a personal interest in the filmmaking—as Stalin did with *Shchors*, *Michurin*, and *Farewell America*, and Hughes did with the equally propagandistic *Jet Pilot*.)

Though this traveling retrospective is close to complete in terms of Dovzhenko's work as a director, the most conspicuous absence is the five features based on some of his unrealized scripts and directed by his widow, Julia Solntseva—an absence clearly ascribable to the cold war and its legacy. (None of them has ever been subtitled in English.) Thanks mainly to having lived in Paris, I've seen four of them—*Poem of an Inland Sea* (1958), *Chronicle of Flaming Years* (1961), *The Enchanted Desna* (1965), and *The Golden Gate* (1969), having missed only *Ukraine in Flames* (1968)—though, apart from *Chronicle*, dubbed into French, all were without any translation (which is also the only way I've seen

Shchors, for that matter). Dovzhenko was all set to direct *Poem of an Inland Sea* when he died in 1956, and I believe that all of them say "directed by Alexander Dovzhenko" in their credits, following a Russian tradition denoting homage to a master. (I'm told that the direction of many theater productions was credited to Constantin Stanislavsky long after he died in 1938.) At the same time, even though *Michurin* was directed by Dovzhenko, the credits there read, "script and production by Alexander Dovzhenko, directed by Julia Solntseva"—probably because Dovzhenko wanted to protest the multiple revisions that Stalin demanded both in the film and in the play (also by Dovzhenko), *Life in Bloom*, that it was based on, and because I suspect that his wife stepped in to take credit as a face-saving gesture. (A silent-film actress, Solntseva starred in the 1924 feature *Aelita* six years before she met Dovzhenko and worked as his assistant on most of his pictures starting with *Earth*, which she also acted in.)

The greatest Solntseva film by far is *The Enchanted Desna*, in 70-millimeter and stereophonic sound—a rapturous evocation of Dovzhenko's rustic youth that made first place on Jean-Luc Godard's ten-best list for 1965—though a friend I saw it with who knew Russian told me its narration is full of Stalinist claptrap. And it's certainly difficult to reconcile Solntseva's desire to honor and extend her husband's legacy with her systematic practice, in *Golden Gate*, of brutally cropping his compositions whenever she uses clips in order to make them conform to a 'Scope format. But the opportunity in *Desna* to see Dovzhenko's aesthetics given blockbuster proportions remains one of the most pungent experiences in my moviegoing life—though until we can find a way to see Stalinist epics in 70-millimeter, I'm not expecting it to turn up at McClurg Court.

We'd like to think that cold-war thinking is behind us, yet nothing more than an updated form of it rules the White House today—with the world neatly split between good guys and bad guys, a division determined mainly by nationality and sustained by stoking the public's fear of annihilation in order to facilitate various seizures and abuses of power, including restrictions of freedom. Meanwhile, the citizens of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea comprise a curious "axis of evil" (read: communist menace) insofar as they all three speak separate languages and the first two have long been at war with each other. But we nonetheless know what Bush means precisely because of the cold war structures that still dominate much of our provincial thinking.

"They" weren't all the same thing during the cold war, either, though the delusion that they somehow were still clouds our thinking. Most accounts we have of Alexander Dovzhenko are found in discussions of Russian cinema, but the man wasn't Russian; he was a Ukrainian who fought against the Russians and, as a

consequence of having done so, is said to have lived under the surveillance of the Soviet government for the rest of his life while making Soviet films. (If we ask whether William Faulkner—another avant-garde bard from the sticks—was primarily an American or primarily a Southerner, we might wind up similarly confused.)

Similarly, we have a bad habit of associating vanguard art with cities regardless of where we're from ourselves—not because it all necessarily comes from cities but because so much of our access to it and understanding of it does. To the best of my knowledge, Dovzhenko retrospectives don't play in the sticks anywhere in the world—although it's worth adding that one such retrospective was featured on French television a few years ago.

The first time I visited Paris, in the 60s, a major rerelease of *Aerograd* was playing at several theaters, which makes me wonder whether it reached any small towns in France as well. The same film, under the title *Frontier*, had an enormous impact on American viewers ranging from James Agee to Elia Kazan in 1936—but that was during a period when communist art was still considered viable and important here. The film concerns the building of a city in the Far East, on the shores of the Pacific—a city that, like the dam in *Ivan*, we never see, though in this case we don't even see the construction started. One thing that's awesome as well as heartbreaking in all of Dovzhenko's best work—and even in some of his worst, like *Michurin*—is its almost limitless faith in the future, which plants him in a different universe from the one we know.

In recent years, it's been impossible to see the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet even in most major cities because they're considered too "difficult." But when I recently caught up with the latest one, *Operai, contadini* (*Workers, Peasants*), at the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Film, I discovered that the only thing "difficult" about it was its refusal to tell a story in any ordinary sense. A group of Italians in a lush-looking (and sounding) forest recite or read portions of a novella by Elio Vittorini, and what kept me riveted wasn't only the extraordinary way their deliveries were directed and orchestrated but the beautiful ways they were framed and filmed (most often from slightly low angles) and their voices recorded in relation to the beautiful natural setting. What they were saying wasn't esoteric—how to make risotto was one of the topics discussed—and I think the film qualifies as heroic portraiture because it's concerned more with who and where its human subjects are than with what they do as characters.

The same thing applies to Dovzhenko's films, where the low angles are generally even more monumental. The passage of time in films like *Arsenal* and *Ivan* is

often conveyed oddly and ambiguously because the sheer existence of the people shown counts for much more than anything that might make them part of a story. One astonishing sequence in *Ivan* consists of nothing but introducing us to various workers, each one cited by name and profession in a separate intertitle, and it's part of Dovzhenko's special genius to make this succession of faces and physiognomies so rich and intense that it wouldn't occur to us to think of any part of it as minimalist. There's a solidity and fullness to each one of them filling the screen that annihilates narrative and ideology alike, leaving only poetry.

—*Chicago Reader*, June 7, 2002

NOTE

1. *Alexander Dovzhenko: The Poet as Filmmaker, Selected Writings*, edited and translated by Marco Carynnyk (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1973), p. 7.

Appendix

1,000 Favorites (A Personal Canon)

The criteria I've used for the inclusion of films on this list are pleasure and edification; I haven't factored in any sense of historical importance that might exist independently of these factors. I have incorporated shorts as well as features, animation as well as live action, and both videos and some works made for television (although nothing made for a particular TV program). I've also included two fragments of unfinished films, *The Confession* (1990) and *Improvisation* (1996).

Broadly speaking, these are the films I'd want to have with me on a desert island, except that I'd want to bring along many other things that I haven't yet seen—including some of my more conspicuous omissions. No one who claims to have seen all the possible contenders for the greatest films ever made can possibly be telling the truth—even in relation to a single year—and so, if I've omitted a film, this may be because I haven't yet caught up with it. Others, however, are absent because I don't value them as much as those that I've included. Such a list thus carries an unfortunate ambiguity, one also present in some of Andrew Sarris's critical valuations in *The American Cinema*, namely, that in many cases it isn't clear whether an exclusion entails a critical judgment.

Although I've made a conscious effort to be exhaustive, unwitting omissions—films I'll eventually hate myself for having overlooked—are inevitable, largely because I haven't come up with any sure-fire method of recalling or tabulating everything I've seen, or even everything I can remember seeing. I undoubtedly saw more candidates during the late 40s and most of the 50s, when I had relatively easy access to the films shown at the theaters operated by my grandfather, and during my subsequent periods as a professional reviewer, in London (1974–76), New York (1979–81), and Chicago (1987–2003)—although I also saw a good many films during my five years in Paris (1969–74), before accepting my first reviewing job.

I've kept this list in (rough) chronological order—and in alphabetical order within each year—simply as a matter of convenience. I have also connected a director or filmmaker to each title, but merely for the sake of easy identification, not because the name is necessarily that of the most important individual involved in the film. With the exception of **Corpus Callosum*, titles preceded by an

asterisk belong to my hundred favorite films—a lineup that for me currently represents la crème de la crème.

J.R.

DECEMBER 2003

Abbreviations

As a partial guide to my extended commentaries on some of the films listed below, the following abbreviations are employed in this list:

AK *Abbas Kiarostami* (with Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa; Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003)
CR *Chicago Reader*
DM *Dead Man* (2d ed.; London: British Film Institute, 2001)
EC *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons*
FTCC *Film: The Critic's Choice* (New York: Billboard Books, 2001)
FTFL *Film: The Front Line 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, 1983)
G *Greed* (London: British Film Institute, 1993)
MM *Midnight Movies* (with J. Hoberman; NewYork: Da Capo, 1991)
MFB *Monthly Film Bulletin*
MMu *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia* (coedited with Adrian Martin; London: British Film Institute, 2003)
MaP *Movies as Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)
MW *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Films We Can See* (Chicago: a cappella, 2000)
PM *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995)

1895

L'arrivée d'un train en Gare de la Ciotat (Louis Lumière)
La sortie des Usines Lumière (Lumière)

1907

**Le Tunnel sous la Manche* (Georges Méliès)

1909

A Corner in Wheat (D. W. Griffith)

1912

Musketeers of Pig Alley (Griffith)

1913–14

Fantomas (Louis Feuillade)

1914

The Avenging Conscience (Griffith)
Child of the Big City (Yevgeni Bauer)
L'enfant de Paris (Léonce Perret)
The Wishing Ring (Maurice Tourneur)

1915–16

**Les vampires* (Feuillade) (*CR, EC*)

1916

Carmen (Charlie Chaplin)
Intolerance (Griffith)

1916–18

Judex (Feuillade)

1917

One A.M. (Chaplin)

1918

**Tih Minh* (Feuillade) (*MaP*)

1919

Barrabas (Feuillade)
Broken Blossoms (Griffith)
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene)
The Oyster Princess (Ernst Lubitsch)
True Heart Susie (Griffith)

1920

The Last of the Mohicans (Maurice Tourneur)
The Parson's Widow (Carl Dreyer)
Die Puppe (*The Doll*, Lubitsch)

1921

Cops (Buster Keaton)
Destiny (Fritz Lang)
The Kid (Chaplin)
Nanook of the North (Robert Flaherty)

1922

Dr. Mabuse (Lang)
**Foolish Wives* (Eric von Stroheim) (*MFB*)
Nosferatu (F. W. Murnau)
Orphans of the Storm (Griffith)
Raskolnikov (Wiene)
Le souriante Madame Beudet (Germaine Dulac)

1923

The Covered Wagon (James Cruze)
The Three Ages (Keaton)

1924

Ballet mécanique (Dudley Murphy / Fernand Léger)
**Greed* (Stroheim) (*G, EC*)
L'inhumaine (Marcel L'Herbier)
Der letzte Mann (*The Last Laugh*, Murnau)
Michael (Dreyer)
**Die Niebelungen* (Lang)
Paris qui dort (*The Crazy Ray*, Réné Clair)
Peter Pan (Herbert Brenon)
Sherlock Jr. (Buster Keaton)
Strike (Sergei Eisenstein)
The Thief of Bagdad (Raoul Walsh)

1925

The Big Parade (King Vidor)
Chess Fever (Vsevolod Pudovkin / Nicolai Shipovsky)
The Gold Rush (Chaplin)
Master of the House (Dreyer)
The Merry Widow (Stroheim)
Metropolis (Lang) (*CR*)
Potemkin (Eisenstein)
Seven Chances (Keaton)
Tartuffe (Murnau)

1926

Dura lex (*By the Law*, Lev Kuleshov)
Faust (Murnau)
Fig Leaves (Howard Hawks)
Moana (Flaherty) (*MFB*)
Mother (Pudovkin)

A Page of Madness / A Crazy Page (Teinosuke Kinugasa)

1927

Un chapeau de paille d'Italie (Clair)
Charleston (Jean Renoir)
The General (Keaton)
La glace à trois faces (Jean Epstein)
It (Clarence Badger)
October (Eisenstein)
The Ring (Alfred Hitchcock) (*MFB*)
Seventh Heaven (Frank Borzage)
**Sunrise* (Murnau)

1928

L'argent (L'Herbier)
The Cameraman (Keaton)
Un chien andalou (Luis Buñuel / Salvador Dali)
Le chute de la maison Usher (Epstein)
The Crowd (King Vidor)
**The Docks of New York* (Josef von Sternberg)
Leave 'em Laughing (Clyde Bruckman)
La passion de Jeanne d'Arc (Dreyer)
La petite marchande d'allumettes (Renoir)
Queen Kelly (Stroheim)
**Spione* (Lang) (*MFB*)
Two Tars (James Parrott)

1929

**Arsenal* (Alexander Dovzhenko) (*EC*)
Black & Tan (Murphy) (*MFB, PM*)
Blackmail (Hitchcock) (*MFB*)
Dynamite (Cecil B. De Mille)
The General Line (Eisenstein)
Hallelujah! (King Vidor)
**Lonesome* (Paul Fejos)
The Love Parade (Lubitsch)
The Man with a Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov)
The New Babylon (Grigori Kozintsev / Leonid Trauberg)
Thunderbolt (Sternberg)

1930

L'age d'or (Buñuel)
All Quiet on the Western Front (Lewis Milestone)
The Blue Angel (Sternberg)
Earth (Dovzhenko) (*EC*)
Her Man (Tay Garnett)
Laughter (Harry d'Arrast)
Monte Carlo (Lubitsch)
Sous les toits de Paris (Clair)
Tabu (Murnau)
That Night's Wife (Yasujiro Ozu)

1931

Blonde Crazy (Roy Del Ruth)
The Champ (King Vidor)
La chienne (Renoir)
**City Lights* (Chaplin)
Dishonored (Sternberg)
Enthusiasm (Vertov)
**M* (Lang) (*EC*)
The Man I Killed (Lubitsch)
**La nuit du carrefour* (Renoir)
Philips Radio (Joris Ivens)
The Struggle (Griffith)

1932

Boudu sauvé des eaux (Renoir)
Freaks (Tod Browning)
Horse Feathers (Norman Z. McLeod)
Las hurdes (*Land Without Bread*, Buñuel) (*CR*)
**Ivan* (Dovzhenko) (*EC*)
**I Was Born, But . . .* (Ozu) (*CR, EC*)

**Love Me Tonight* (Rouben Mamoulian)
Marie, légende hongrois (Fejos)
The Mask of Fu Manchu (Charles Brabin)
Me and My Gal (Walsh)
Million Dollar Legs (Edward F. Cline)
The Music Box (James Parrott)
The Old Dark House (James Whale)
One Hour with You (Lubitsch)
Scarface (Hawks)
The Testament of Dr. Mabuse (Lang)
Trouble in Paradise (Lubitsch)
Vampyr (Dreyer) (*MFB*)
Zéro de conduite (Jean Vigo)

1933

The Bitter Tea of General Yen (Frank Capra)
Bombshell (Victor Fleming)
Deserter (Pudovkin)
Duck Soup (Leo McCarey)
The Great Consoler (Kuleshov)
**Hallelujah, I'm a Bum* (Milestone) (*CR*)
Hard to Handle (Mervyn LeRoy)
Man's Castle (Borzage)
Passing Fancy (Ozu)
Stoopnocracy (Dave Fleischer)
Topaze (d'Arrast)

1934

Angèle (Marcel Pagnol) (*CR*)
L'atalante (Vigo) (*PM*)
The Black Cat (Edgar G. Ulmer)
Cleopatra (De Mille)
The Gay Divorcee (Mark Sandrich)
Judge Priest (John Ford)
Our Daily Bread (King Vidor)
The Scarlet Empress (Sternberg)
La signora di tutti (Max Ophüls)
Toni (Renoir) (*MFB*)
Twentieth Century (Hawks)

1935

Aerograd / *Frontier* (Dovzhenko) (*Ec*)
Bride of Frankenstein (James Whale)
Le crime de Monsieur Lange (Renoir)
Ruggles of Red Gap (McCarey)
The Scoundrel (Ben Hecht / Charles MacArthur)
**Sylvia Scarlett* (George Cukor)
The 39 Steps (Hitchcock)

1936

The Devil Doll (Browning)
Fury (Lang)
Modern Times (Chaplin)
The Only Son (Ozu)
The Prisoner of Shark Island (Ford)
Rose Hobart (Joseph Cornell)
Schlussakkord (*Final Accord*, Douglas Sirk)
Show Boat (Whale)

1937

La grande illusion (Renoir)
The Great Garrick (Whale)
**Make Way for Tomorrow* (McCarey)
Les perles de la couronne (Sacha Guitry)
You Only Live Once (Lang)

1938

Alexander Nevsky (Eisenstein)
La bête humaine (Renoir)
The Childhood of Maxim Gorky (Mark Donskoi)
The Lady Vanishes (Hitchcock)
Olympia (Leni Riefenstahl)
You and Me (Lang)

1939

L'espoir (André Malraux)
Love Affair (McCarey)
Only Angels Have Wings (Hawks)

**La règle du jeu* (Renoir)
**Story of the Late Chrysanthemums* (Kenji Mizoguchi)
The Wizard of Oz (Fleming)

1940

**Christmas in July* (Preston Sturges)
Foreign Correspondent (Hitchcock)
The Grapes of Wrath (Ford)
The Great Dictator (Chaplin) (*PM*)
The Long Voyage Home (Ford)
Pinocchio (Ben Sharpsteen / Hamilton Luske)
Rebecca (Hitchcock)
The Shop Around the Corner (Lubitsch)
The Thief of Bagdad (Ludwig Berger / Michael Powell / Tim Whelan)

1941

All That Money Can Buy (William Dieterle)
Brothers and Sisters of the Toda Family (Ozu)
**Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles)
Dumbo (Sharpsteen)
Hellzapoppin' (H. C. Potter)
The Maltese Falcon (John Huston)
Man Hunt (Lang) (*CR*)
The Strawberry Blonde (Walsh)
Suspicion (Hitchcock)

1942

Cat People (Jacques Tourneur)
The 47 Ronin (Mizoguchi)
**The Magnificent Ambersons* (Welles)
The Palm Beach Story (Sturges)
Sullivan's Travels (Sturges)
Les visiteurs du soir (Marcel Carné)

1943

Le ciel est à vous (Jean Grémillon) (*CR*)
**Day of Wrath* (Dreyer)
Dumb-Hounded (Tex Avery)
**Heaven Can Wait* (Lubitsch)
I Walked with a Zombie (Jacques Tourneur)
The Leopard Man (Jacques Tourneur)
Lumière d'été (Grémillon) (*CR*)
Red Hot Riding Hood (Avery)
**The Seventh Victim* (Mark Robson)
This Land Is Mine (Renoir)
Who Killed Who? (Avery)

1944

At Land (Maya Deren)
Brief Encounter (David Lean)
Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder)
Les enfants du paradis (Carné)
Jammin' the Blues (Gjon Mili)
Laura (Otto Preminger) (*EC*)
Meet Me in St. Louis (Vincente Minnelli)
Screwball Squirrel (Avery) (*MFB*)
To Have and Have Not (Hawks)
The Tower of the Seven Hunchbacks (Edgar Neville) (*CR*)
When Strangers Marry (William Castle)

1944–1946

**Ivan the Terrible*, Parts 1 and 2 (Eisenstein)

1945

The Clock (Minnelli)
Les dames du bois de Boulogne (Robert Bresson)
Duel in the Sun (King Vidor)
Scarlet Street (Lang)
The Three Caballeros (Norman Ferguson)

1946

La belle et la bête (Jean Cocteau)
**The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler)
Five Women Around Utamaro (Mizoguchi)

From This Day Forward (John Berry)
Gilda (Charles Vidor)
The Man I Love (Walsh)
A Matter of Life and Death (Powell / Emeric Pressburger)
My Darling Clementine (Ford)
Notorious (Hitchcock)
Païsa (Roberto Rossellini)
Sciuscia (*Shoeshine*, Vittorio De Sica)

1947

Dark Passage (Delmer Daves)
Germany Year Zero (Rossellini)
I Know Where I'm Going (Powell / Pressburger)
King Size Canary (Avery)
**Monsieur Verdoux* (Chaplin)
Motion Painting No. 1 (Oskar Fischinger)
Odd Man Out (Carol Reed)
Out of the Past (Jacques Tourneur)
Quai des Orfèvres (Henri-Georges Clouzot)
Woman on the Beach (Renoir)

1948

The Argyle Secrets (Cy Endfield) (*MaP*)
The Bicycle Thief (De Sica) (*EC*)
Force of Evil (Abraham Polonsky)
Good Sam (McCarey)
A Hen in the Wind (Ozu)
The Lady from Shanghai (Welles)
Letter from an Unknown Woman (Ophüls)
Moonrise (Borzage)
The Pirate (Minnelli)
The Red Shoes (Powell/Pressburger)
Rope (Hitchcock)
**Spring in a Small City* (Fei Mu)
La terra trema (Luchino Visconti)
They Live by Night (Nicholas Ray) (*MaP*)

1949

Adam's Rib (Cukor)
Bad Luck Blackie (Avery)
Begone Dull Care (Norman McLaren)
Blood of the Beast (Georges Franju)
Ecole des facteurs (Jacques Tati)
Les enfants terribles (Jean-Pierre Melville)
Gun Crazy (Joseph H. Lewis)
Intruder in the Dust (Clarence Brown)
Jour de fête (Tati) (*EC*)
Late Spring (Ozu)
Little Rural Riding Hood (Avery) (*MFB*)
The Reckless Moment (Ophüls)
Samson and Delilah (De Mille)
Stromboli (Rossellini)
Thieves Highway (Jules Dassin)
The Third Man (Reed)
The Window (Ted Tatzlaff)

1950

All About Eve (Joseph L. Mankiewicz)
Annie Get Your Gun (George Sidney)
Cinderella (Wilfred Jackson / Luske / Clyde Geronimi)
The Father of the Bride (Minnelli)
The Flame and the Arrow (Jacques Tourneur)
The Gunfighter (Henry King)
In a Lonely Place (Nicholas Ray) (*MaP*)
Los olvidados (Buñuel)
Orphée (Cocteau)
Panic in the Streets (Elia Kazan)
The Sound of Fury / Try and Get Me! (Endfield) (*MaP*)
**Stars in My Crown* (Jacques Tourneur)
Sunset Boulevard (Wilder)
Wagonmaster (Ford)

1951

Ace in the Hole / The Big Carnival (Wilder)
Alice in Wonderland (Geronimi/Luske/Jackson)

Bellissima (Visconti)
The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise)
Hôtel des Invalides (Franju)
Pandora and the Flying Dutchman (Albert Lewin)
Singin' in the Rain (Stanley Donen / Gene Kelly)
**The Steel Helmet* (Samuel Fuller) (*PM*, *EC*)
A Streetcar Named Desire (Kazan)
The Tall Target (Anthony Mann)
The Well (Leo Popkin / Russell Rouse)
The White Sheik (Federico Fellini)

1952

Angel Face (Preminger) (*EC*)
The Bad and the Beautiful (Minnelli)
**The Big Sky* (Hawks)
Clash by Night (Lang)
Europa 51 (Rossellini)
Ikiru (Akira Kurosawa)
The Life of Oharu (Mizoguchi) (*MFB*)
Limelight (Chaplin)
The Lusty Men (Nicholas Ray)
Madame de . . . (Ophüls)
Monkey Business (Hawks)
My Son John (McCarey)
The Narrow Margin (Richard Fleischer)
**Othello* (Welles) (*PM*)
Park Row (Fuller) (*EC*)
Son of Paleface (Frank Tashlin)
Les statues meurent aussi (Alain Resnais)
Umberto D (De Sica)
Venom and Eternity (Jean-Isadore Isou)

1953

The Band Wagon (Minnelli)
The Big Heat (Lang)
Dangerous When Wet (Charles Walters)
Duck Amuck (Chuck Jones)
The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T. (Roy Rowland)
**Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks) (*PM*)
The Golden Coach (Renoir)
I Love Melvin (Don Weis) (*EC*)
Kiss Me Kate (Sidney)
**The Naked Spur* (Mann) (*EC*)
99 River Street (Phil Karlson)
Pickup on South Street (Fuller) (*EC*)
The Story of Three Loves (Gottfried Reinhardt / Minnelli)
**The Sun Shines Bright* (Ford)
Tokyo Story (Ozu) (*EC*)
Ugetsu monogatari (Mizoguchi)

1954

The Adventures of Hajji Baba (Weis)
The Barefoot Contessa (Mankiewicz)
Chikamatsu monogatari (*The Crucified Lovers*, Mizoguchi)
Executive Suite (Wise)
**Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray) (*MaP*, *EC*)
Mr. Hulot's Holiday (Tati)
**Rear Window* (Hitchcock) (*EC*)
River of No Return (Preminger)
**The Saga of Anatahan* (Sternberg) (*PM*)
**Sansho the Bailiff* (Mizoguchi)
Senso (Visconti)
Silver Lode (Alan Dwan)
A Star Is Born (Cukor)
**Track of the Cat* (William Wellman)
The Wages of Fear (Clouzot)

1955

Artists and Models (Tashlin)
Bad Day at Black Rock (John Sturges)
The Cobweb (Minnelli)
East of Eden (Kazan)
The Eddy Duchin Story (Sidney)
Kiss Me Deadly (Robert Aldrich)
The Lady Without Camelias (Michelangelo Antonioni) (*MFB*)

Land of the Pharaohs (Hawks)
Lola Montès (Ophüls)
The Long Gray Line (Ford)
The Man with the Golden Arm (Preminger)
Moonfleet (Lang)
Mr. Arkadin (Welles) (*MaP*)
The Night of the Hunter (Charles Laughton)
Nuit et brouillard (Resnais)
**Ordet* (Dreyer)
The Phenix City Story (Karlson) (*EC*)
Rebel Without a Cause (Nicholas Ray) (*MaP*)
Salt of the Earth (Herbert Biberman)
Sawdust and Tinsel (Ingmar Bergman)
Shin heike monogatari (*New Tales of the Taira Clan*, Mizoguchi)
The Trouble with Harry (Hitchcock)
Wichita (Jacques Tourneur) (*CR*)

1956

Aparajito (Satyajit Ray)
Baby Doll (Kazan)
Bhowani Junction (Cukor)
Bigger Than Life (1956) (Nicholas Ray) (*MaP*)
Eléna et les homes (Renoir)
Forbidden Planet (Fred McLeod Wilcox)
The Fountain of Youth (Welles) (*PM*)
The Girl Can't Help It (Tashlin)
**Guys and Dolls* (Mankiewicz)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel)
**The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick)
**A Man Escaped* (Bresson)
The Searchers (Ford)
Toute la mémoire du monde (Resnais)
While the City Sleeps (Lang)

1957

An Affair to Remember (McCarey)
Bitter Victory (Nicholas Ray)
La casa del angel (Leopoldo Torre Nilsson)
Forty Guns (Fuller)
A King in New York (Chaplin)
Kiss (Yasuzo Masumura) (*MMu*)
Les maîtres fous (Jean Rouch)
Paths of Glory (Kubrick)
Run of the Arrow (Fuller)
Sweet Smell of Success (Alexander Mackendrick)
Twelve Angry Men (Sidney Lumet)
Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? (Tashlin) (*EC*)
The Wrong Man (Hitchcock)

1958

Ajantrik (*Pathetic Fallacy*, Ritwik Ghatak)
Ashes and Diamonds (Andrzej Wajda) (*FTCC*)
Le chant du styrène (Renais)
The Curse of the Demon (Jacques Tourneur)
Gigi (Minnelli)
**India* (Rossellini)
Man of the West (Mann) (*EC*)
Les mistons (François Truffaut)
Mon oncle (Tati)
Murder by Contract (Irving Lerner)
Party Girl (Nicholas Ray) (*MaP*, *EC*)
Rock-a-Bye Baby (Tashlin) (*EC*)
Une simple histoire (Marcel Hanoun)
The Tarnished Angels (Sirk)
A Time to Love and a Time to Die (Sirk)
Touch of Evil (Welles)
Vertigo (Hitchcock)
Wind Across the Everglades (Nicholas Ray) (*MaP*)

1959

Anatomy of a Murder (Preminger) (*EC*)
L'avventura (Antonioni) (*PM*)
**Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard)
The 400 Blows (Truffaut)

Good Morning (Ozu) (*PM, EC*)
**Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais)
The Magician (Bergman)
Nazarin (Buñuel)
North by Northwest (Hitchcock)
Peeping Tom (Powell)
Pickpocket (Bresson)
Purple Noon (René Clément)
**Rio Bravo* (Hawks)
La testament d'Orphée (Cocteau)
**The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* (Lang) (*EC*)

1960

The Bellboy (Jerry Lewis)
Bells Are Ringing (Minnelli)
Les bonnes femmes (Claude Chabrol) (*FTCC*)
**The Cloud-Capped Star* (Ghatak)
Devi (Satyajit Ray)
Elmer Gantry (Richard Brooks)
The False Student (Masumura) (*MMu*)
Let's Make Love (Cukor)
Psycho (Hitchcock)
The Savage Innocents (Nicholas Ray)
**Shadows* (John Cassavetes) (*PM*)
Spartacus (Kubrick)
The 1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse (Lang)
Tirez sur la pianiste (Truffaut) (*FTCC*)
Wild River (Kazan)
The Young One (Buñuel) (*EC*)
Zazie dans le métro (Louis Malle)

1961

Accatone (Pier Paolo Pasolini)
Chronicle of a Summer (Rouch / Edgar Morin) (*FTCC*)
Cleo from 5 to 7 (Agnès Varda)
The Exiles (Kent Mackenzie)
The Hustler (Robert Rossen)
The Ladies' Man (Jerry Lewis)
**Last Year at Marienbad* (Resnais) (*FTCC*)
Lola (Jacques Demy)
Paris nous appartient (Jacques Rivette)
Viridiana (Buñuel)
**A Wife Confesses* (Masumura) (*MMu*)

1962

An Actor's Revenge (Kon Ichikawa)
Confessions of an Opium Eater (Albert Zugsmith)
**Eclipse* (Antonioni) (*PM, FTCC*)
The Exterminating Angel (Buñuel)
**The House Is Black* (Forugh Farrokhzad) (*AK*)
The Manchurian Candidate (John Frankenheimer) (*PM*)
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (Ford)
Le rendez-vous de minuit (Roger Leenhardt)
Too Late Blues (Cassavetes) (*PM*)

1963

About Something Else (Véra Chytilová)
Adieu Philippine (Jacques Rozier)
Contempt (Godard) (*EC*)
8½ (Fellini)
The Leopard (Visconti)
Méditerranée (Jean-Daniel Pollet) (*EC*)
Muriel (Resnais)
The Nutty Professor (Jerry Lewis)
La ricotta (Pasolini)
Shock Corridor (Fuller)
The Trial (Welles)

1964

Band of Outsiders (Godard)
The Battle of Culloden (Peter Watkins)
Before the Revolution (Bernardo Bertolucci) (*FTCC*)
Black God, White Devil (Glauber Rocha)
The Disorderly Orderly (Tashlin)

Gertrud (Dreyer) (*PM*)
A Hard Day's Night (Richard Lester)
I Am Cuba (Mikhail Kalatozov) (*EC*)
La jetée (Chris Marker)
The Married Woman (Godard)
Noviciat (Noël Burch)
La peau douce (Truffaut)
Point of Order! (Emile De Antonio)
Red Desert (Antonioni)
Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors (Sergei Paradjanov)
Zulu (Endfield) (*MaP*)

1965

Alphaville (Godard) (*PM, FTCC*)
Brick and Mirror (Ebrahim Golestan)
The Enchanted Desna (Julia Solntseva) (*EC*)
Masculine Feminine (Godard)
Not Reconciled (Jean-Marie Straub / Danièle Huillet) (*MFB*)
Red Line 7000 (Hawks)
Report (Bruce Conner)
Vinyl (Andy Warhol)

1966

Andrei Rublev (Andrei Tarkovsky)
**Au hasard Balthasar* (Bresson)
**Black Girl* (*La noire de . . .*, Ousmane Sembène) (*MaP*)
Daisies (Chytilová) (*FTCC*)
Hawks and Sparrows (Pasolini)
Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (Kenneth Anger)
Lord Love a Duck (George Axelrod)
Made in USA (Godard) (*PM*)
Oedipus Rex (Pasolini)
Persona (Bergman)
Red Angel (Masumura) (*MMu*)
Two or Three Things I Know About Her (Godard) (*PM*)
The War Game (Watkins)
What's Up, Tiger Lily? (Woody Allen) (*MFB*)

1967

Anticipation (Godard)
Belle de jour (Buñuel)
Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn)
China Is Near (Marco Bellochio)
La chinoise (Godard)
David Holzman's Diary (Jim McBride)
Le horla (Pollet)
Love Affair (Dušan Makavejev)
Mouchette (Bresson)
**Playtime* (Tati) (*PM, MaP*)
Point Blank (John Boorman)
La prise de pouvoir de Louix XIV (Rossellini)
Privilege (Watkins)
The Red and the White (Miklós Jancsó)
The Shooting (Monte Hellman)
Wavelength (Michael Snow) (*MFB*)
Weekend (Godard)
**The Young Girls of Rochefort* (Demy) (*FTCC, EC*)

1968

The Bridegoom, the Comedienne, and the Pimp (Straub/Huillet)
Death by Hanging (Nagisa Oshima)
Faces (Cassavetes) (*PM*)
Je t'aime, je t'aime (Resnais)
The Party (Blake Edwards)
Petulia (Lester)
The Plot Against Harry (Michael Roemer) (*MaP*)
Rosemary's Baby (Roman Polanski)
Sayat Nova (Paradjanov)
The 17th Parallel (Ivens / Marceline Loridan)
Stolen Kisses (Truffaut)

Targets (Peter Bogdanovich)
Teorema (Pasolini) (*FTCC*)
2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick) (*EC*)

1969

**L'amour fou* (Rivette)
Back and Forth (Snow) (*MFB*)
The Bed Sitting Room (Lester)
Boy (Oshima)
La femme infidèle (Chabrol)
Fuck (*Blue Movie*, Warhol)
The Grandmother (David Lynch) (*MM*)
Ice (Robert Kramer)
Katzelmacher (Rainer Werner Fassbinder)
Ma nuit chez Maud (Eric Rohmer)
Mister Freedom (William Klein) (*CR*)
A Time for Dying (Budd Boetticher)
Tom Tom the Piper's Son (Ken Jacobs)
The Wild Bunch (Sam Peckinpah)

1970

Le cochon (Jean Eustache / Jean-Michel Barjol)
Days and Nights in the Forest (Satyajit Ray)
L'enfant sauvage (Truffaut)
Fata Morgana (Werner Herzog)
The Honeymoon Killers (Leonard Kastle)
Performance (Nicolas Roeg / Donald Camell) (*MM*)
Le petit théâtre de Jean Renoir (Renoir)
The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes (Wilder)
Scenes from Under Childhood (Stan Brakhage)
The Spider's Stratagem (Bertolucci)
Tristana (Buñuel)
Vampir (Pedro Portabella)
Woodstock (Michael Wadleigh) (*CR*)
Zabriskie Point (Antonioni) (*PM*)

1971

The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes (Brakhage)
The Death of Maria Malibrun (Werner Schroeter)
Deux fois (Jackie Raynal) (*FTFL*)
Four Nights of a Dreamer (Bresson)
How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman (Nelson Pereira Dos Santos)
McCabe and Mrs. Miller (Robert Altman) (*EC*)
A New Leaf (Elaine May) (*EC*)
Nostalgia (Hollis Frampton)
**Out 1* (Rivette) (*MaP*)
Petit à petit (Rouch)
Red Psalm (Jancsó) (*FTCC*)
**La région centrale* (Snow)
Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania (Jonas Mekas) (*FTFL*)
Trafic (Tati) (*PM*)
Two Lane Blacktop (Hellman) (*EC*)
Walkabout (Roeg)
Wanda (Barbara Loden)
W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism (Makavejev) (*FTCC*)

1972

Aguirre, The Wrath of God (Herzog)
**Avanti!* (Wilder)
The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (Buñuel) (*MaP*)
Fat City (Huston)
Fellini Roma (Fellini)
The Heartbreak Kid (May) (*EC*)
Last Tango in Paris (Bertolucci)
**Out 1: Spectre* (Rivette) (*PM*)
Solaris (Tarkovsky) (*MaP*)

1973

Badlands (Terrence Malick) (*MFB*)
**F for Fake* (Welles) (*PM*)

The Long Goodbye (Altman) (*EC*)
Martha (Fassbinder)
The Mongols (Parviz Kimiavi)
The Mother and the Whore (Jean Eustache) (*MaP*)
Narita: Heta Village (Shinsuke Ogawa)
Nathalie Granger (Marguerite Duras)
**Parade* (Tati) (*MaP*)
Salome (Carmelo Bene) (*PM*)
Some Call It Loving (James B. Harris)
Touki Bouki (Djibril Diop Mambéty)
What? (Polanski) (*MaP*)

1974

Alice in the Cities (Wim Wenders)
Benilde ou a virgem-mãe (Manoel de Oliveira)
Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia (Peckinpah)
**Celine and Julie Go Boating* (Rivette) (*PM*, *FTCC*)
Cockfighter (Hellman)
The Conversation (Francis Ford Coppola)
Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer (Thom Andersen)
La gueule ouverte (Maurice Pialat)
Lancelot du lac (Bresson) (*MaP*)
Occasional Work of a Female Slave (Alexander Kluge)
The Phantom of Liberty (Buñuel)
Reason, Debate, and a Tale (Ghatak)
Stavisky . . . (Resnais)
The Traveler (Abbas Kiarostami) (*AK*)
A Woman Under the Influence (Cassavetes) (*MFB*, *PM*)

1975

Anatomie d'un rapport (Luc Moullet)
**Barry Lyndon* (Kubrick)
India Song (Duras)
Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Chantal Akerman) (*PM*)
The Killing of a Chinese Bookie (Cassavetes) (*PM*)
Mandingo (Richard Fleischer)
Mikey and Nicky (May) (*EC*)
Night Moves (Penn) (*MFB*)
Numéro deux (Godard)
The Passenger (Antonioni) (*MFB*)
Two Solutions for One Problem (Kiarostami) (*AK*)
Welfare (Frederick Wiseman)

1976

Breakfast (Snow)
Edvard Munch (Watkins)
11 × 14 (James Benning) (*FTFL*)
Family Plot (Hitchcock) (*PM*)
Ici et ailleurs (Godard / Anne-Marie Miéville)
L'Innocente (Visconti)
In the Realm of the Senses (Oshima)
Obsession (Brian De Palma) (*MFB*)
Wide Angle Saxon (George Landow)

1977

Annie Hall (Allen)
Le camion (Duras)
Citizen's Band (Jonathan Demme)
Colloque de chiens (*Dogs' Dialogue*, Raúl Ruiz)
The Devil, Probably (Bresson)
Eraserhead (Lynch) (*MM*)
Hitler, a Film from Germany (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg)
Last Chants for a Slow Dance (Jon Jost) (*FTFL*)
One Way Boogie Woogie (Benning) (*FTFL*)
Passing Through (Larry Clark)
**Providence* (Resnais) (*PM*)
That Obscure Object of Desire (Buñuel)
Valse Triste (Conner)

1978

La chambre verte (Truffaut)
The Discipline of DE (Gus Van Sant)
**Doomed Love* (de Oliveira) (*PM*)
Filming Othello (Welles) (*PM*)
France/tour/détour/deux/enfants (Godard/Miéville)
From the Cloud to the Resistance (Straub/Huillet) (*FTFL*)
Genèse d'un repas (Moullet)
Incontinence (Manuel De Landa) (*FTFL*)
Killer of Sheep (Charles Burnett)
LMNO (Robert Breer) (*FTFL*)
Martin (George Romero) (*MM*)
Mongoloid (Conner)
Les rendez-vous d'Anna (Akerman) (*FTFL*)
The Scenic Route (Mark Rappaport) (*FTFL*)

1979

All That Jazz (Bob Fosse)
Apocalypse Now (Coppola) (*PM*)
Beneath the Valley of the Ultravixens (Russ Meyer)
1941 (Steven Spielberg)
**Percival le gallois* (Rohmer) (*FTCC*)
Real Life (Albert Brooks)
Richard Pryor—Live in Concert (Jeff Margolis)
**Stalker* (Tarkovsky)
Ticket of No Return (Ulrike Ottinger) (*FTFL*)
Wise Blood (Huston)

1980

Atlantic City (Malle)
The Big Red One (Fuller) (*EC*)
Gloria (Cassavetes)
Grown-ups (Mike Leigh) (*MaP*)
The Little Richard Story (Klein) (*CR*)
Melvin and Howard (Demme)
La mémoire courte (Eduardo de Gregorio)
Metaphor (King Vidor)
Mon oncle d'Amérique (Resnais)
Out of the Blue (Dennis Hopper)
The Shining (Kubrick)

1981

Charmed Particles (Andrew Noren) (FTFL)
Cutter's Way (Ivan Passer)
Hardly Working (Jerry Lewis) (*PM*)
History of the World, Part 1 (Mel Brooks) (*PM*)
Modern Romance (Albert Brooks)
**Orderly or Disorderly* (Kiarostami) (*AK*)
Pennies from Heaven (Herbert Ross)
La toit de la baleine (Ruiz) (*PM*)
**Too Early, Too Late* (Straub/Huillet) (*FTFL*)
Two Portraits (Peter Thompson) (*CR*)
The Vulture (Yaki Yosha)
White Dog (Fuller) (*PM*)

1982

Blade Runner (Ridley Scott)
Une chambre en ville (Demy)
En râchâchant (Straub/Huillet)
Field Diary (Amos Gitai)
One Man's War (Edgardo Cozarinsky)
Scenario du film "Passion" (Godard)
You Are Not I (Sara Driver) (*FTFL*)

1983

Adynata (Leslie Thornton) (*FTFL*)
Ananas (Gitai)
Les années 80 (Akerman)
L'argent (Bresson)
Cracking Up (Jerry Lewis)
Fellow Citizen (Kiarostami) (*AK*)
The Gold Diggers (Sally Potter)
Hammett (Wenders)
It's a Good Life (Joe Dante)
The King of Comedy (Scorsese)

My Brother's Wedding (Burnett)
Sans soleil (Marker)
Selva. Un portrait de Parvameh Navaï (Maria Klonaris)
Son's Big Doll (Hou Hsiao-hsien) (*EC*)
The State of Things (Wenders)
The Unknown Chaplin (Kevin Brownlow / David Gill)
Videodrome (David Cronenberg)

1984

Almanac of Fall (Béla Tarr) (*PM*)
Barres (Moullet)
Broadway Danny Rose (Allen)
Choose Me (Alan Rudolph)
The Day the Sun Turned Cold (Yim Ho) (*CR*)
The Funeral (Juzo Itami)
**Love Streams* (Cassavetes) (*PM*)
Mutable Fire (Erotic Psyche)
1984 (Michael Radford)
Stranger Than Paradise (Jim Jarmusch) (*DM*)
Swing Shift (original cut, Demme)

1985

Day of the Dead (Romero)
The Horse Thief (Tian Zhuangzhuang) (*CR*)
**Manuel on the Island of Wonders* (Ruiz) (*EC*)
The Man Who Envied Women (Yvonne Rainer)
**Mix-Up* (Françoise Romand) (*CR*)
Next of Kin (Atom Egoyan)
Passionless Moments (Jane Campion)
Shoah (Claude Lanzmann) (*MaP*)
Taipei Story (Edward Yang) (*EC*)
The Time to Live and the Time to Die (Hou) (*EC*)
Vagabond (Varda)

1986

Bad Blood (Leos Carax) (*MaP*)
Down by Law (Jarmusch) (*DM*)
Joan Does Dynasty (Joan Braderman)
**Mélo* (Resnais) (*PM*)
Mémoire des apparences (Ruiz) (*PM, EC*)
The Mexican Tapes (Louis Hock)
The Peddler (Mohsen Makhmalbaf)
Routine Pleasures (Jean-Pierre Gorin)
Sherman's March (Ross McElwee)
Sleepwalk (Driver) (*CR*)
Tampopo (Itami)

1987

Candy Mountain (Rudy Wurlitzer / Robert Frank) (*CR, EC*)
La chouette aveugle (Ruiz) (*EC*)
Damnation (Tarr) (*PM*)
From the Pole to the Equator (Yervant Gianikian / Angela Ricci Lucchi)
Full Metal Jacket (Kubrick) (*EC*)
Housekeeping (Bill Forsyth) (*CR*)
House of Games (David Mamet)
Ishtar (May) (*EC*)
Landscape Suicide (Benning)
The Last Emperor (Bertolucci) (*CR*)
Mammame (Ruiz) (*CR*)
The Silent Majority (Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa)
Tough Guys Don't Dance (Norman Mailer) (*CR*)
Universal Hotel / Universal Citizen (Thompson) (*CR*)
Walker (Alex Cox) (*CR, EC*)
A Western (Laurie Dunphy)
**Where Is the Friend's House?* (Kiarostami) (*AK*)
**Yeelen* (*Brightness*, Souleymane Cissé)

1988

Bird (Clint Eastwood) (*PM*)
Black Sin (Straub/Huillet)

Camp Thiaroye (Sembène / Thierno Faty Sow) (*CR*)
Decalogue (Krzysztof Kieslowski) (*EC*)
**Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terrence Davies) (*EC*)
Essai d'ouverture (Moullet)
Golub (Jerry Blumenthal / Gordon Quinn) (*CR*)
Hairspray (John Waters) (*CR*)
High Hopes (Leigh) (*CR*)
King Lear (Godard) (*PM*)
Puissance de la parole (Godard)
**A Tale of the Wind* (Ivens/Loridan) (*EC*)
Talking to Strangers (Rob Tregenza) (*MaP*)
Trois places pour le 26 (Demy)
Who Framed Roger Rabbit (Robert Zemeckis) (*CR*)

1989

The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (Terry Gilliam) (*CR*)
**The Asthenic Syndrome* (Kira Muratova) (*MaP*)
Cézanne (Straub/Huillet)
Chameleon Street (Wendell B. Harris Jr.) (*CR*)
City of Sadness (Hou) (*EC*)
The Deadman (Peggy Ahwesh / Keith Sanborn) (*CR*)
Do the Right Thing (Spike Lee) (*CR, MaP*)
Enemies, a Love Story (Paul Mazursky) (*CR*)
Forevermore: Biography of a Leach Lord (Eric Saks) (*CR*)
The Iceman Cometh (Clarence Fok Yiu-leung)
Images of the World and the Inscription of War (Harun Farocki) (*CR*)
Marriage of the Blessed (Mohsen Makhmalbaf)
Mr. Hoover and I (De Antonio) (*CR*)
Rembrandt Laughing (Jost) (*CR*)
A Spy in the House That Ruth Built (Vanalyne Green)
Sweetie (Campion) (*CR*)

1990

Archangel (Guy Maddin) (*EC*)
**Close-up* (Kiarostami) (*AK*)
The Confession (fragment, Paradjanov) (*CR*)
Days of Being Wild (Wong Kar-wai)
Homework (Kiarostami) (*AK*)
How to Live in the Federal Republic of Germany (Farocki) (*CR*)
The Machine That Killed Bad People (Steve Fagin)
Mr. and Mrs. Bridge (James Ivory)
No, or the Vainglory of Command (de Oliveira)
**Nouvelle vague* (Godard)
One Hour (Frank)
Texasville (Bogdanovich) (*CR*)
To Sleep with Anger (Burnett) (*CR*)
White Hunter, Black Heart (Eastwood) (*CR*)

1991

**Actress* (Stanley Kwan) (*EC*)
Les amants du Pont Neuf (*The Lovers on the Bridge*, Carax) (*MaP*)
La belle noiseuse (Rivette) (*CR*)
**A Brighter Summer Day* (230-minute version, Edward Yang) (*EC*)
La cabale des oursins (Moullet)
Defending Your Life (Albert Brooks) (*CR*)
Hangin' with the Homeboys (Joseph B. Vasquez) (*CR*)
My Own Private Idaho (van Sant) (*CR*)
Night and Day (Akerman) (*MaP*)
Rhapsody in August (Kurosawa) (*MaP*)

1992

Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven)
Bram Stoker's Dracula (Coppola) (*CR*)

Careful (Maddin) (*CR*)
Close My Eyes (Stephen Poliakoff)
Deep Cover (Bill Duke) (*PM*)
The Famine Within (Katherine Gilday) (*CR*)
Guelwaar (Sembène) (*CR*)
The Hours and Times (Christopher Munch) (*CR*)
Life and Nothing More . . . (Kiarostami) (*AK*)
The Long Day Closes (Davies) (*CR*)
Naked Lunch (Cronenberg) (*CR*)

1993

Bitter Moon (Polanski) (*MaP*)
The Blue Kite (Tian) (*CR*)
Calendar (Egoyan) (*MaP*)
D'est (Akerman) (*CR*)
Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis) (*CR*)
Highway Patrolman (Cox) (*CR*)
Hyenas (Diop Mambéty) (*CR*)
I'll Do Anything (unreleased musical version, James L. Brooks) (*CR, MW*)
Latcho drom (Tony Gatlif) (*MaP*)
Matinee (Dante) (*CR*)
My Favorite Season (André Téchiné) (*CR*)
La naissance de l'amour (Philippe Garrel) (*CR*)
**The Puppet Master* (Hou) (*MaP, EC*)
Ruby in Paradise (Victor Nuñez) (*CR*)
The Scent of Green Papaya (Tran Anh Hung) (*CR*)

1994

Ashes of Time (Wong) (*CR*)
Chartres Series (Brakhage)
Crumb (Terry Zwigoff) (*MaP*)
Dieu sait quoi (Pollet)
Exotica (Egoyan) (*CR*)
Exterior Night (Rappaport)
The Last Boleshevik (Marker) (*MaP*)
Red (Kieslowski) (*MaP*)
**Sátántángo* (Tarr) (*EC*)
The Second Heimat (Edgar Reitz) (*CR*)
That's Entertainment! III (Bud Friedgen / Michael J. Sheridan)

1995

Before Sunrise (Richard Linklater) (*CR*)
Blush (Li Shaohong) (*EC*)
**Dead Man* (Jarmusch) (*DM, EC*)
From the Journals of Jean Seberg (Rappaport) (*EC*)
Good Men, Good Women (Hou) (*EC*)
A Great Day in Harlem (Jean Bach)
Haut bas fragile (Rivette) (*EC*)
Safe (Todd Haynes) (*MaP*)
Salaam Cinema (Mohsen Makhmalbaf)
The Son of Gascogne (Pascal Aubier) (*CR, MW*)
Underground (Emir Kusturica) (*CR*)
**When It Rains* (Burnett) (*EC*)

1996

The Ceremony (Chabrol) (*EC*)
Goodbye South, Goodbye (Hou)
Improvisation (Mili) (filmed in 1950 with Charlie Parker; released on video in Japan in 1996)
Irma Vep (Olivier Assayas) (*EC*)
Mahjong (Yang) (*EC*)
Oriental Elegy (Alexander Sokurov) (*CR*)
Suicide (Gregg Bordowitz) (*CR*)
Thieves (Téchiné) (*EC*)
Whispering Pages (Sokurov) (*CR*)

1997

The Apostle (Robert Duvall) (*CR*)
Blue Moon (Ko I-Cheng) (*MMu*)
Comrades, Almost a Love Story (Peter Chan)
Destiny (Youssef Chahine) (*CR, MW*)

Fast, Cheap & Out of Control (Errol Morris) (*EC*)
Happy Together (Wong) (*CR*)
Jazz '34: Remembrances of Kansas City Swing (Altman) (*CR*)
Love and Death on Long Island (Richard Kwietniowski) (*CR*)
The River (Tsai Ming-liang) (*CR*)
The Second Civil War (Dante)
Taste of Cherry (Kiarostami) (*AK*)
Yours (Jeff Scher)

1998

Alone. Love Wastes Andy Hardy (Martin Arnold)
Bulworth (Warren Beatty) (*CR*)
Circle's Short Circuit (Caspar Stracke) (*CR*)
Divorce Iranian Style (Kim Longinotto / Ziba Mir-Hosseini)
Histoire(s) du cinéma (Godard) (*MaP*)
**Inquiétude* (de Oliveira) (*MW*)
Khroustaliov, My Car! (Alexei Guerman) (*CR*)
New Rose Hotel (Abel Ferrara)
The Newton Boys (Linklater) (*CR, EC*)
The Thin Red Line (Malick) (*EC*)
West Beirut (Ziad Doueiri)

1999

The Apple (Samira Makhmalbaf)
Beau travail (Claire Denis) (*CR*)
Besieged (Bertolucci) (*EC*)
Eyes Wide Shut (Kubrick) (*EC*)
Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai (Jarmusch) (*EC*)
I Stand Alone (Gaspar Noé) (*CR, MW*)
Kikujiro (Takeshi Kitano) (*EC*)
Lovers of the Arctic Circle (Julio Medem) (*CR*)
Mr. Zhao (Lu Yue) (*CR*)
Public Housing (Wiseman)
Rosetta (Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne) (*EC*)
Rushmore (Wes Anderson) (*CR*)
6ixtynin9 (Pen-Ek Ratanaruang)
**The Wind Will Carry Us* (Kiarostami) (*AK*)

2000

The Child and the Soldier (Seyyed Reza Mir-Karimi)
Chunhyang (Im Kwon-taek) (*CR*)
The Day I Became a Woman (Marziyeh Meshkini) (*EC*)
George Washington (David Gordon Green) (*CR*)
Les glaneurs et la glaneuse (Varda) (*CR*)
Hamlet (Michael Almereyda)
The Heart of the World (Maddin) (*EC*)
The Hole (Tsai) (*CR*)
In the Mood for Love (Wong) (*CR*)
Mysterious Object at Noon (Apichatpong Weerasethakul) (*CR*)
**Platform* (Jia Zhang-ke) (*CR*)
Yi Yi (Yang) (*CR*)

2001

**A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg) (*EC*)
The Circle (Jafar Panahi) (*MMu*)
I'm Going Home (de Oliveira) (*CR*)
The Mad Songs of Fernanda Hussein (John Gianvito) (*CR*)
Mulholland Drive (Lynch)
My Voyage to Italy (Scorsese)
Operai, contadini (Straub/Huillet) (*EC*)
Où gît votre sourire enfoui? (Pedro Costa)
Pistol Opera (Seijun Sukuzi) (*CR*)
Waking Life (Linklater) (*EC*)
What Time Is It There? (Tsai) (*CR, MMu*)

2002

The Cat's Meow (Bogdanovich) (*CR*)
**Corpus Callosum* (Snow) (*EC*)
Femme Fatale (De Palma) (*CR*)
Russian Ark (Sokurov)
Spider (Cronenberg)
Springtime in a Small Town (Tian)
Sweet Sixteen (Ken Loach)
Tangos voles (de Gregorio)
The Tracker (Rolf de Heer)
25th Hour (Lee) (*CR*)
Y tu mamá también (Alfonso Cuarón)

2003

Crimson Red (Panahi)
Down with Love (Peyton Reed) (*CR*)
Elephant (van Sant) (*CR*)
Go Further (Ron Mann)
Goodbye, Dragon Inn (Tsai)
Los Angeles Plays Itself (Andersen)
The Same River Twice (Robb Moss) (*CR*)

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Index

Aaron, Judge Edward, 138
Abbas, Ackbar, 176
Acker, Kathy, 243
Actress (Kwan film), 167, 170–78, 212
Actress, The (Cukor film), 172
Adamov, Arthur, 243
Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, 260
Advise and Consent, 329
Aelita, 192
Aerograd, 400, 401
After Hours, 268
Agee, James, 375
A.I. Artificial Intelligence, 271–79
Airport, 205
Akerman, Chantal, 111
Akutagawa, Ryunosuke, 216
Alberti, Maryse, 242
Aldiss, Brian, 273
Alekan, Henri, 240
Alexander, Jason, 302
Alexandre, Michel, 64
Alexandrov, Grigori, 77–78
Allen, Woody, 187, 365
Almanac of Fall, 49
Alone: Love Wastes Andy Hardy, 231–32
Alphaville, 306
Altman, Robert, 80–94, 298
America Becoming, 285
Amerika/Class Relations, 124, 125
Ames, Morgan, 89
Ammelrooy, Willeke van, 240
Anatomy of a Murder, 330–31
Andrei Rublev, 199
Andrews, Dana, 326, 327, 328
Andrews, Edward, 142
Angel Face, 326, 330
Angell, Roger, 257
Antonioni, Michelangelo, 35, 130–35, 181, 182, 322, 343, 355
Apocalypse Now, 78
Apostle, The, 113, 117
Apple, The, 281
Apted, Michael, 211
Archangel, 187–90
Ardant, Fanny, 131
Arendt, Hannah, 71
Arkin, David, 93
Arnold, Martin, 231–32
Arriagada, Jorge, 241
Arrowsmith, William, 133
Arsenal, 400, 405–6
Artists and Models, 28, 307
Assayas, Olivier, 63, 163–69, 219, 347, 348
Asthenic Syndrome, The, 43–47
Auberjonois, René, 82, 83, 85
Auerbach, Erich, 185–86
Auteuil, Daniel, 63, 65
avventura, L', 133, 135, 182, 322

Babé, Fabienne, 63
Babu, Ayuko, 286
Baby Doll, 144
Back and Forth, 317
Bad and the Beautiful, The, 183
Badin, Jean, 240
Bagdasarian, Ross, 26
Baka, Miroslaw, 157
Baker, Chris, 273
Ballad for the Kid, 206
Ballard, J. G., 206
Bananas, 187
Band of Outsiders, 306

Bankolé, Isaach de, 218
Baratta, Martina, 126
Baratta, Vladimir, 126
Barbarella, 208
Bardini, Aleksander, 153
Bardot, Brigitte, 13, 179–80, 182, 184, 207
Barnes, Margaret Anne, 141
Barocco, 63
Barr, Charles, 211
Barry Lyndon, 141, 266, 267
Barthelmess, Richard, 122
Barthes, Roland, 60, 65
Bartók, Béla, 233
Baskin, Richard, 92
Basler, Antoine, 168
Baudelaire, Charles, 215
Baudrillard, Jean, 237
Baxley, Barbara, 92
Bay of the Angels, The, 36, 228
Bazin, André, 184, 294, 377
Beard, The (McClure), 206
Beatty, Clyde, 101, 103, 104
Beatty, Ned, 93
Beatty, Warren, 86, 369
beau Serge, Le, 58, 60
Beckett, Samuel, 51, 352
Before Sunrise, 293
Before the Revolution, 251
Belafonte, Harry, 144
Bellamy, Ralph, 302
Belmondo, Jean-Paul, 181, 208, 357
Benayoun, Robert, 312
Benning, James, 113–18
Berger, William, 126
Bergman, Ingmar, 213
Bergman, Ingrid, 182
Berlin, Jeannie, 366
Bernanos, Georges, 70
Bernhard, Thomas, 51
Berry, Dennis, 206
Berthomé, Jean-Pierre, 36, 228, 377
Berto, Juliet, 91
Bertolucci, Bernardo, 251–56, 306, 354
Besieged, 252–56
Betti, Laura, 122
Beware of the Holy Whore, 167
Beyond the Clouds, 130–35
Bezace, Didier, 63
Bhowani Junction, 172
Bibb, Leon, 258
Bickford, Charles, 327, 328
Biette, Jean-Claude, 214
Big Brass Ring, The, 4–5, 383
Big Red One, The, 359, 363
Birdcage, The, 369
Birth of a Nation, The, 8
Bisset, Jacqueline, 58
Bitomsky, Hartmut, 115
Bitter Victory, 336
Björkman, Stig, 100, 213
Black, Karen, 93
Blackboards, 281
Black Cat, The, 243
Blake, William, 216
Blakley, Ronee, 93
Blind Husbands, 7
Blind Owl, The, 246, 247
Blonde Cobra, 231
Blood of Others, The, 58
Blood Simple, 154, 156–57
Bloody Dawn (Bloody Morning), 54
Blowup, 343
Blue Moon, 230, 232
Blush, 53–57
Boatman, Michael, 286
Bogdanovich, Peter, 4, 26, 377, 378
Bogosian, Eric, 293
Bonjour Tristesse, 205, 326, 330
Bonnaire, Sandrine, 58
bonnes femmes, Les, 37, 58
Bordeu, Fernando, 240, 244
Bordwell, David, 150
Borges, Jorge Luis, 238, 245, 251
borgne, Le, 247
Borinage, 39
Botton, Alain de, 105
boucher, Le, 37, 58
Bouise, Jean, 373
Bourgeois, Jacques, 107
Bradbury, Ray, 287

Brady, Frank, 14, 377
Branded to Kill, 220
Brando, Marlon, 197
Breakers, The, 41
Breakfast, 317
Breaking the Waves, 62, 95–100
Breathless, 58, 179, 181, 205, 326
Brecht, Bertolt, 15, 71
Breck, Peter, 361
Brenez, Nicole, 67, 70, 167
Bresson, Robert, 70, 71, 111, 128, 261, 301, 346–47
Brewster McCloud, 82–83, 84, 85
Bridegroom, the Comedienne, and the Pimp, The, 124
Bridge, The, 39
Bridges, Beau, 288
Brief History of Time, A, 102
Brighter Summer Day, A, 339, 340–43, 345
Brightness, 41
Brisbane, Arthur, 357
Broca, Philippe de, 205
Brody, Jo Ann, 87
Broken Blossoms, 122
Brontë Sisters, The, 63, 65
Brook, Claudio, 259, 260
Brooks, Rodney, 101, 102, 103–4
Brown, Timothy, 93
Brownlow, Kevin, 365
Bugaboo, 130
Bunny Lake Is Missing, 326
Buñuel, Luis, 239, 244, 257–61
Burgess, Anthony, 262
Burnett, Charles, 285–90
Burr, Raymond, 28
Buruma, Ian, 315–16
Buscemi, Steve, 155
Butler, Hugo, 260
Bu Wancang, 174
Byg, Barton, 128

Caddy, The, 26
Cain, Bill, 287, 289, 290
Calderón de la Barca, Pedro, 241–42
California Split, 80–81, 84, 85, 91, 92
Callow, Simon, 376, 378, 379–82
Calzatti, Alexander, 374
Campion, Jane, 98
Candidate, The, 352
Candy Mountain, 352, 354, 355–56
Caneele, Séverine, 121
Caniff, Milton, 28
Cannon, Dyan, 333
Cao Lei, 55
Capra, Frank, 38
captive, La, 111
Carawan, Guy, 254
Careful, 191
Carey, Gary, 224–25
Carey, Timothy, 266
Carr, Harry, 10
Carradine, Keith, 84, 93
Carringer, Robert L., 376
Cartlidge, Katrin, 100
Caselli, Chiara, 131
Case of the Silver Snake, The, 54
Casino, 184
Cassavetes, John, 169, 365, 367
Cassel, Jean-Pierre, 59
Castel, Lou, 167
Castelnuovo, Nino, 33, 228
Caviezel, Jim, 79
Céline and Julie Go Boating, 91, 195, 197
Centennial Summer, 328
Ceremony, The, 58–61
Cézanne, Paul, 133
Chabrol, Claude, 31, 37, 58–61, 205
Chair vs. Ruth Snyder, The, 359, 360–61
Chakiris, George, 33, 225, 228
chambre en ville, Une, 35, 36, 37, 226
Chandler, Raymond, 28
Chang, Sylvia, 173
Channing, Carol, 331, 332
Chaplin, Charlie, 13, 19, 31, 310, 388, 389, 399
Chaplin, Geraldine, 92
Chapman, Michael, 301
Charisse, Cyd, 337
Cheerful Wind, 347

Chen Kaige, 54, 113
Chereau, Patrice, 109
Cheung, Maggie, 165–69, 173, 175–76, 177
Chiao, Peggy, 172, 212
chien andalou, Un, 244
chouette aveugle, La, 246, 247
Christie, Ian, 240
Christie, Julie, 86
Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach, 124
Chronicle of a Summer, 39
Chu Tien-wen, 347
Cinema of Tears, 213
Cinema of Unease, 213
Circle, The, 283
Cissé, Souleymane, 41
Citizen Kane, 5, 7, 14, 107, 297, 365, 376, 377
City Girl, 76
City of Pirates, 245, 246
City of Sadness, 349, 350
Clark, Larry, 285, 372, 373
Clarke, Arthur C., 273
Clockwork Orange, A, 262, 267
Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 275, 278
Close-up, 339
Cobb, Lee J., 323
Cobbs, Bill, 287
Cobos, Juan, 377
Cocteau, Jean, 40, 41
Coen, Ethan, 153–57, 158, 159
Coen, Joel, 153–57, 158, 159
Cohen, Ari, 190
Cohen, Leonard, 83, 86
Colford, William E., 241
Coltrane, John, 256, 398
Confederacy of Dunces, A (Toole), 393–95
Conformist, The, 251
Confucian Confusion, A, 343
Conrad, Joseph, 51, 356
Conrad, Tony, 233
Contempt, 13, 179–86
Cooper, Gary, 323, 324, 325
Corey, Wendell, 27
Corneille, Pierre, 124
Cornell, Joseph, 231, 397
**Corpus Callosum*, 317–18
Cote, Laurence, 63, 64–65, 195
Cousins, The, 58
Cowie, Peter, 377
Cox, Alex, 355
Cradle Will Rock, The, 5
Crèmer, Ute, 126
Crime of Monsieur Lange, The, 195
Cronenberg, David, 121, 269
Crowd, The, 13
Crucible, The, 62
Cruise, Tom, 263, 265
Cukor, George, 172, 177
Curiel, Herbert, 240
Curtis, Tony, 144
Cute Girl, 347
Cyclist, The, 281

Daisy Kenyon, 328
Dale, Grover, 33, 225, 228
dames du Bois de Boulogne, Les, 111
Damnation, 49
Dance Me to My Song, 130, 131
Daney, Serge, 19, 24
Dante, Joe, 78
Darcy, Georgein, 27
Dardenne, Jean-Pierre, 69–71
Dardenne, Luc, 69–71
Dark Angel, 355
Dark at Noon, 243, 247
Dark Wind, The, 102
Darnell, Linda, 327
Darrieux, Danièlle, 226
Dash, Julie, 285
Daughter of the Nile, 347
Davies, Terence, 172, 386–98
Davis, Carl, 11
Day for Night, 167
Day I Became a Woman, The, 281–84
Day of Wrath, 95, 96
Days of Heaven, 75, 76, 77, 396–97
Dazed and Confused, 293

Dead Father, The, 191
Dead Man, 163, 165, 216, 220, 221, 394
Death by Hanging, 175
Death of Empedocles, The, 123–29
Decalogue, The, 152–59, 199
Decomble, Guy, 23
Deer Hunter, The, 75
Defiant Ones, The, 144
Delerue, Georges, 184
Deleuze, Gilles, 266–67
Delon, Alain, 222
Delphy, Julie, 293
Dementyev, Andrei, 44
Demy, Jacques, 32–37, 223–29
Denby, David, 164, 271
Deneuve, Catherine, 33, 34, 63, 65, 237
Denicourt, Marianne, 195
De Niro, Robert, 295–301
Denton, Crahan, 259
De Palma, Brian, 99, 187, 295
Depardieu, Gérard, 106
Depp, Johnny, 220
Dequenne, Emilie, 68, 70, 121
Deren, Maya, 244–45
Deserter, 370
Desny, Ivan, 63
Desser, David, 147
Devil's Pass Key, The, 7
De Wilde, Brandon, 332
Dial M for Murder, 29
Diary of a Country Priest, 301
Dibb, Mike, 211
Dick, Philip K., 292
Dinesen, Isak, 234
Diogenes Laertius, 126
Disney Studio, 286–87, 289, 302
disprezzo, Il (Moravia), 180
Distant Voices, Still Lives, 172, 386–98
Divorce Iranian Style, 280
Dr. Strangelove, 266, 267, 269
Dogs' Dialogue, 247
D'Onofrio, Vincent, 178n.3
Don Quixote, 383–84
Doqui, Robert, 93
Dorléac, Françoise, 33, 225
Double Life of Veronique, The, 152
Double Tour, A, 58
Dovzhenko, Alexander, 399–406
Dreamers, The, 239
Dreyer, Carl, 21, 95–97, 98, 127, 208, 213
Dreyfuss, Richard, 278
Drouzy, Maurice, 95
Duelle, 168
Dumbo, 276
Dumont, Bruno, 120–22
Duras, Marguerite, 125
Durgnat, Raymond, 211, 308, 317
Dust in the Wind, 348, 349
Duvall, Robert, 82, 113
Duvall, Shelley, 82, 84, 93, 191
Dyer, Richard, 194, 196

Earth, 13, 400, 401
Eastwood, Clint, 114, 207–8
Eclipse, 35, 133, 135, 345
école des facteurs, L', 20
Ede, François, 21–22
Edelstein, David, 79
Edwards, Blake, 307
Edwards, James, 143
Ehrenstein, David, 62, 266
Eisenschitz, Bernard, 334
Eisenstein, Sergei, 39, 77–78, 107, 187, 193, 370, 374
Element of Crime, The, 96, 98
Eliacheff, Caroline, 60
Ellington, Duke, 253
Elsaesser, Thomas, 240
Empedocles, 126–28
Enchanted Desna, The, 403–4
Engel, André, 109
En râchâchant, 125
Epidemic, 96
Epstein, Jean, 291
Eraserhead, 188
Erickson, Nick, 344
Evans, Gene, 361
Evein, Bernard, 36, 228
Evelyn, Judith, 28

Every Revolution Is a Throw of the Dice, 124
Exodus, 326, 330
Expectations, 339
Eyes Wide Shut, 120, 131, 262–70, 271

Faces, 169
Facts of Murder, The, 119
Fado majeur et mineur, 239
Fahrenheit 451, 287
Falconetti, Renée, 96
Falk, Peter, 367
Fallen Angel, 328
Family Plot, 27
Family Portrait, 54
Farber, Manny, 122, 214, 297, 300, 318, 322, 359, 375
Farewell, America, 402–3
Far from Vietnam, 38
Fargo, 153–57, 158, 159
Farmanara, Bahman, 280
Farmer, Gary, 221
Farner, Ellen, 35
Farr, Eric, 204
Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, 96, 122, 167, 389
Fast, Cheap & Out of Control, 101–4
Faulkner, William, 51, 63, 261, 349, 405
Faye, Alice, 328
Faysse, Dominique, 166
Federspiel, J. F., 355
Fellini Satyricon, 186
femme infidèle, La, 37, 58
Ferrer, José, 328
Feuillade, Louis, 109, 164, 221
Field, Todd, 263
Fiéschi, Jean-André, 330
55 Days in Peking, 336, 337
Figueroa, Gabriel, 260
Finler, Joel, 4
Finney, Jack, 143
First Time, The, 309
Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 221
Flaming Creatures, 191, 231–35
Fleming, Michael, 5–6
Flirting, 254
Flowers of Shanghai, 349
Floyd, Bart, 138
Fonda, Henry, 329
Fonda, Jane, 204, 207, 208, 332
Fontaine, Joan, 144
Foolish Wives, 10
Ford, John, 22, 158, 301, 321
Foreman, Richard, 234
Forever Amber, 328
For Ever Mozart, 184
Foster, Jodie, 296, 297
Four Corners, 113–18
400 Blows, The, 37
400 Million, The, 39, 40
Frampton, Hollis, 116
Franju, Georges, 270
Frank, Robert, 355
Frankenstein (Shelley), 216
Frears, Stephen, 210–11
French Provincial, 63
Fridriksson, Fridrik Tor, 213
From the Cloud to the Resistance, 125
From the Journals of Jean Seberg, 204–9
Fuller, Dale, 8
Fuller, Samuel, 30, 357–63
Full Metal Jacket, 154, 266, 267

Gadda, Carlo Emilio, 119
Gallotta, Jean-Claude, 245
Gang of Four, The, 64, 195
García Lorca, Federico, 292
García Márquez, Gabriel, 54
Gardner, Ava, 177
Gare du Nord, 327
Garfield, Allen, 94
Garland, Judy, 231
Gary, Romain, 206, 207
Gates of Heaven, 102
Gehr, Ernie, 230
Généaologies d'un crime, 237
Genet, Jean, 60
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, 297
Gere, Richard, 302–5
Gerima, Haile, 285

Germany: Night of the Filmmakers, 211–12
Germi, Pietro, 119
Gertrud, 21
Get Out Your Handkerchiefs, 75
Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai, 216–22
Ghosts of Mississippi, 62
Giaccometti, Alberto, 292
Gibson, Henry, 92
Gielgud, John, 244
Gill, David, 365
Girl Can't Help It, The, 306
Give a Girl a Break, 196
Glass Shield, The, 286, 288
Gleason, Jackie, 332
Glenn, Scott, 93
Glover, Danny, 285
Godard, Jean-Luc, 19, 13, 20–21, 38, 58, 76, 167, 179–86, 197–98, 201, 208, 213–14, 292, 306, 321–22, 326, 357
Goddess, The, 172
godelureaux, Les, 58
Goldberg, Adam, 293
Goldblum, Jeff, 93
Golden Boat, The, 107, 242–44
Good Men, Good Women, 349, 350
Good Morning, 34, 150–51
Good Morning, Miss Dove, 335
Goodbye, South, Goodbye, 163, 344, 348, 349–50
Gorman, Cliff, 219
Gorshin, Frank, 191
Gottli, Michael, 190
Gould, Elliott, 81, 82, 91
Gowland, Gibson, 7, 8, 178n.3
Graduate, The, 367–68
Grahame, Gloria, 336
Grant, Kathryn, 140
Grapes of Wrath, The, 158
Graver, Gary, 5, 378
Gravina, Cesare, 8
Gravity's Rainbow (Pynchon), 187
Greed, 3–12, 70, 178n.3, 365
Green, Guy, 337
Greenaway, Peter, 244, 392
Green Green Grass of Home, 347
Green Room, The, 37
Greggory, Pascal, 109
Gregory, Lady, 292
Grieg, Edvard, 16
Griffith, D. W., 8, 102, 122, 192, 232
Grizzard, George, 329
Grodin, Charles, 369
Grundgens, Gustaf, 16
Grusin, Dave, 88, 89
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?, 255
Gunning, Charles, 293
Gunning, Tom, 131
Gutman, James C., 336
Guys and Dolls, 197

Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai (Tsunetomo), 216, 217, 218
Hallelujah, I'm a Bum, 224
Halpern, David, Jr., 336
Hamilton, Bernie, 258, 260
Handy, John, 286
Haneke, Michael, 76
Hanson, Curtis, 363
Hao Dazheng, 53, 57
Harbou, Thea von, 15
Harlow, Jean, 206
Harris, Barbara, 94
Harris, Ed, 355
Harris, James B., 269
Harris, Robert A., 26
Hartley, Ted, 5
Hasumi, Shigehiko, 147, 314
Hawke, Ethan, 178n.3, 293
Hawks, Howard, 14, 394
Hay, Alexandra, 326, 332
Hayden, Sterling, 87, 336
Hayes, Frank, 8
Hayes, John Michael, 27
Hayward, David, 93
Hearst, William Randolph, 5
Heartbreak Kid, The, 365, 366, 367–68, 369
Heart of the World, The, 191–93

Hearts of the World, 192
Hedayat, Sadegh, 246, 262
Hellman, Monte, 353
Hemingway, Ernest, 38, 202
Henderson, Brian, 311
Henning-Jensen, Astrid, 213
Herina, John, 289
Heroic Trio, The, 166
Herr, Michael, 265
Herrmann, Bernard, 295–96, 297, 298
Hersholt, Jean, 7
He Saifei, 56
Hestand, Mary, 243
Hickey, Dave, 19, 23
Higham, Charles, 376, 378
Hisaishi, Joe, 315
Histoire(s) du cinéma, 184, 201, 231
History Lessons, 127
Hitchcock, Alfred, 13, 26–31, 58, 59, 244
Hoberman, J., 48, 231, 234, 309
Hodeir, André, 80
Hoffman, Dustin, 36
Holden, Stephen, 199
Hölderlin, Friedrich, 124, 126, 127, 128
Hollywood or Bust, 306
Homer, 185–86
Hoover, Dave, 101, 104
Hoover, J. Edgar, 205
Horse Thief, The, 40
Hot Blood, 334
Hôtel des Amériques, 63, 65
Hou Hsiao-hsien, 43, 163, 338, 346–50
Houseman, John, 335, 380–81
Howard, Ken, 332
How Yukong Moved the Mountains, 39
Hughes, Howard, 335, 403
Huillet, Danièle, 51, 116, 123–29, 405
humanité, L', 119–22
Hunter, Holly, 98
Huppert, Isabelle, 60
Hurry Sundown, 332, 333n.1
Hurt, Mary Beth, 204, 206
Hurt, William, 274
Hussein, Mahmoud, 125
Huston, John, 267
Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting, The, 239–40

I Am Cuba, 370–75
I Am Curious, Film, 213
Iceman Cometh, The, 167
Identification of a Woman, 132, 135
I Love Melvin, 197
Images, 83, 84
Imitation of Life, 144
In a Lonely Place, 334, 336
Indiana, Gary, 355
Indian Tomb, The, 182
Inside/Out, 75–76
Intolerance, 8, 102
Introduction to Arnold Schönberg's Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene, 124
Invasion of the Body Snatchers, 143
Irma Vep, 163–69, 219
I Shot Jesse James, 357
Ishtar, 366, 368–69
Island in the Sun, 144
Isou, Jean-Isadore, 169
Israel, Robert, 11
It's All True, 370, 377, 381–82, 383, 384
Ivan, 13, 400, 401, 405–6
Ivens, Joris, 38–42
I Was Born, But . . ., 146–51

Jacobs, Ken, 231, 233
James, Henry, 24
Jameson, Fredric, 338, 340
Jam Session, 314
Jarl, Stefan, 213
Jarmusch, Jim, 97, 163, 216–22, 294, 392, 394
Jarry, Alfred, 62
Jeanne Dielman, 111
Jeanne la pucelle, 194 , 196
Jeu de l'oie, Le, 245
Jia Zhang-ke, 191
Johnny Guitar, 334
John of the Cross, Saint, 124
Johns, Jasper, 115, 117

Johnson, Diane, 311
Jones, Allison, 287
Jones, Idwal, 10
Jones, James, 76–77
Jones, Kent, 270, 345
Jones, Laurie, 366
Jones, LeRoi, 398
Jost, Jon, 114–15, 230, 321
Jour de fête, 19–25
Joyce, James, 111, 134, 317
Judex, 270
Jules and Jim, 37
Just Before Nightfall, 58, 59–60
Just to Be Together, 354–55

Kael, Pauline, 23, 136, 208–9, 225, 272, 298, 301, 376
Kafka, Franz, 51, 119, 124, 262, 267, 268, 378–79
Kalatozov, Mikhail, 370–75
Kamshalov, Alexander, 46
Karina, Anna, 182, 195
Karlson, Phil, 136–45
Karmitz, Marin, 60
Katt, Nicky, 293
Katz, Ephraim, 95, 141
Katzelmacher, 122
Kauffmann, Stanley, 180, 367
Kaufman, George S., 310
Kaufman, Millard, 362
Kaurismaki, Aki, 213
Kazan, Elia, 137, 334
Kehr, Dave, 247, 253, 300, 336
Keitel, Harvey, 98, 296, 301
Kellerman, Sally, 82
Kelly, Gene, 33, 223, 226, 228
Kelly, Grace, 27
Khanjian, Arsinée, 169
Khatami, Mohammad, 280
Kiarostami, Abbas, 113–14, 219, 280, 281, 321, 338, 339
Kidman, Nicole, 263, 270
Kids, 372–73
Kierkegaard, Søren, 292
Kieslowski, Krzysztof, 152–59, 199
Kikujiro, 313–16
Kiley, Richard, 139, 142
Killer of Sheep, 285
Killing, The, 64, 266, 267, 268
Kilmartin, Terence, 109
King, Clydie, 88, 89
King, Stephen, 262
Kingdom, The, 96
King of Comedy, The, 295
King, Queen, Knave, 307, 308
Kirby, Michael, 242
Kirkeby, Per, 100
Kitano, Takeshi, 313
Klawans, Stuart, 6, 381
Klein, William, 38, 307
Klossowski, Pierre, 239–40
Ko I-cheng, 230, 232
Kodar, Oja, 5, 378
Kohner, Susan, 144
Koszarski, Richard, 6
Koteas, Elias, 79
Kovalov, Oleg, 211
Kramer, Stanley, 144
Krasznahorkai, László, 49, 50–51
Krohn, Bill, 27, 28, 30, 154, 210
Kubrick, Stanley, 64, 120, 131, 141, 153, 154, 262–70, 271–79
Kuleshov, Lev, 208
Kurosawa, Akira, 217, 314, 355
Kuttner, Henry, 217
Kwan, Stanley, 167, 170–78, 212–13

Labourier, Dominique, 91
Ladies of the Chorus, 138
Lady from Shanghai, The, 365
Lady Oscar, 37
Laemmle, Carl, 7
Lafont, Bernadette, 106
Lambert, Gavin, 211
Lang, Christa, 359
Lang, Fritz, 13–18, 59, 180, 182–83, 208, 269
Langlois, Henri, 210, 213
Larner, Jeremy, 352
Lasdun, James, 252

Last Bolshevik, The, 201, 202
Last Emperor, The, 252
Last Poets, 115
Last Tango in Paris, 251, 252
Last Tycoon, The (Fitzgerald), 221
Lau, Carina, 176
Laughton, Charles, 329, 380
Laura, 326–28
Law, Clara, 212
Law, John Philip, 332
Law, Jude, 274
Lawrence, D. H., 292
Leaming, Barbara, 377, 383
Léaud, Jean-Pierre, 91, 166
Ledoyen, Virginie, 59
Lee, Brenda, 91
Lee, Mona, 293
Leenhardt, Roger, 215
Leffingwell, Edward, 234
Léger, Jean, 109
Legrand, Michel, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 223
Lehman, Ernest, 27
Leigh, Janet, 323
Leopard Man, The, 13
Les Girls, 172
Lessing, Doris, 133
Levine, Joseph E., 179
Lewis, Jerry, 306–7, 311, 312
Lewton, Val, 29
Leyda, Jay, 402
Lidell, Wendy, 43
Lifeboat, 29
Life Is a Dream, 241–42, 246
Life of Jesus, The, 120, 122
Light in August, 51, 261
Lilith, 205, 208
Limosin, Jean-Pierre, 314
Lin, Brigitte, 212
Linklater, Richard, 175, 178n.3, 291–94
Li Shaohong, 53–57, 212
Little Buddha, 252, 354
Little Stiff, A, 294
Little Toys, 172
Lola, 32, 34, 36, 37, 227, 228
Lolita, 262
Lollobrigida, Gina, 308
London, Julie, 323, 325
Long Day Closes, The, 172
Long Goodbye, The (film), 84, 85, 86, 87, 88–91, 93
"Long Goodbye, The" (song), 88–90
Lopate, Phillip, 378
Loridan, Marceline, 39
Lorre, Peter, 15, 16
Love and Duty, 172
Love Me Tonight, 224
L.627, 64
Lubitsch, Ernst, 328, 402–3
Lumbly, Carl, 287
Luna, 251
Lusty Men, The, 334
Lynch, David, 188
Lynch, John Carroll, 158

M, 13–18, 208, 269
Mackendrick, Alexander, 211
Mackey, Louis, 293
Macready, George, 265
Macy, William H., 155
Maddin, Guy, 187–193
Made in USA, 306
Maen, Norman, 223
Magimel, Benôit, 63
Magnificent Ambersons, The, 5–6, 11, 12n.2, 29, 55–56, 57, 379, 390
Mahjong, 343, 344
Maids, The (Genet), 60
Mailer, Norman, 76–77
Mainwaring, Dan, 143
Maitland, Sara, 273
Makhmalbaf, Mohsen, 280–84, 338, 339
Makhmalbaf, Samira, 346
Malick, Terrence, 75–79, 396–97
Malkovich, John, 106, 132, 133, 134, 135
Mallarmé, Stéphane, 101, 124
Malle, Louis, 294
Mammame, 245
Mankiewicz, Joseph, 182, 197
Mann, Anthony, 321–25
Mann, Thomas, 292

Manne, Shelly, 329
Man of the West, 321–25
Mansfield, Jayne, 311
Manuel on the Isle of Wonders, 107, 245
Manuel's Fates, 245
Man Who Was Thursday, The, 245
Man with the Golden Arm, The, 329
Marceau, Sophie, 134
March, William, 77
Marcoen, Alain, 69
Marcon, André, 195
Marker, Chris, 38, 41, 200–203, 314
Marley, John, 169
Marquet, Henri, 20
Married Woman, A, 215
Mars Attacks!, 62
Martin, Adrian, 244, 247
Martin, Dean, 26, 183
Martin, Steve, 265
Marton, Andrew, 337
Mary Reilly, 211
Masculine Feminine, 292
MASH, 81–83, 84, 85
Masina, Giulietta, 96
Mastroianni, Marcello, 133, 237, 243
Matthau, Walter, 365, 367
Matthiessen, Peter, 259–60
May, Elaine, 364–69
Mayer, Louis B., 7
Mayor, Andrea, 109
Mazzarella, Marcello, 109
McBride, Joseph, 223, 377, 379–80
McCabe, Colin, 180, 210
McCabe and Mrs. Miller, 83, 84, 85, 86–87, 93, 278
McCarey, Leo, 375, 388, 389
McCarthy, Todd, 14, 144
McClure, Michael, 206
McConaughey, Matthew, 178n.3
McCulloch, Kyle, 188
McDormand, Frances, 155
McElhatten, Mark, 191
McGilligan, Patrick, 14
McGuinness, Richard, 332
McGuire, Biff, 140
McIntire, John, 141
McNamara, Maggie, 326
McNaughton, John, 359
McTeague (Norris), 8–9, 365
Medea, 96
Méditerranée, 182, 183
Medvedkin, Alexander, 201
Meeker, Ralph, 323
Meersman, Key, 258, 260, 261
Mehrjui, Darhius, 280
Mekas, Jonas, 232, 235
Méliès, Georges, 41
Melville, Jean-Pierre, 220, 222
Mendes, Sam, 325
Mendez, Ray, 101, 103, 104
Mendonca, George, 101, 104
Menjou, Adolphe, 265
Mercer, Johnny, 88
Merlet, Valentin, 59
Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence, 315
Merry-Go-Round, 7
Merry Widow, The, 7
Meshes of the Afternoon, 244–45
Meshkini, Marzieh, 281–84
Michel, Marc, 34
Michurin, 403–4
Midgley, Fanny, 8
Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, 114, 117
Miéville, Anne-Marie, 213–14
Mignard, Pierre, 109
Mikey and Nicky, 366, 367, 368, 369
Mikhalkov, Nikita, 135
Milestone, Lewis, 38
Millais, Hugh, 87
Minnelli, Liza, 332
Minnelli, Vincente, 183
Miracle of Morgan's Creek, The, 311
Mirror, The, 199, 201, 203
Mission: Impossible, 99, 100
Mitchell, George, 140
Mitchell, Millard, 323
Mitchum, Robert, 328
Mizoguchi, Kenji, 55, 399
Model Shop, 37

Moll, Giorgia, 181, 182
Monet, Claude, 115, 116, 117
Mon oncle, 20, 23, 24
Monroe, Marilyn, 138, 297
Montand, Yves, 37
Montez, Maria, 232, 234
Monty, Ib, 95
Moon Is Blue, The, 326, 329
Moore, Robert, 332
Moravia, Alberto, 180, 251
Moreau, Jeanne, 36, 133, 207
Morin, Edgar, 39
Morris, Errol, 101–4
Moses and Aaron, 124
Mouchette, 67, 70, 261
Moullet, Luc, 183, 246
Mourlet, Michel, 184
Mozhukhin, Ivan, 30, 208
Mr. Freedom, 307, 308
Mr. Hulot's Holiday, 20, 22
Muchnik, Federico, 243
Muhl, Edward, 4
Müller, Robby, 97, 217–18
Mulvey, Laura, 377
Muratova, Kira, 43–47
Murch, Walter, 4, 113
Murder by Contract, 220
Muriel, 34–35
Muri Romani, 321
Murnau, F. W., 76, 79
Murphy, Michael, 93
Murray, Don, 329
Musidora, 165, 166, 167
My Brother's Wedding, 285
My Favorite Season, 63, 65
My Name Is Ivan, 200
My Son John, 375

Nabokov, Vladimir, 262, 307
naissance du jour, La, 37
Naked, 100
Naked Spur, The, 321–25
Naremore, James, 377
Nashville, 91–94, 298
Nausea (Sartre), 301
Navarro, Ernie, 240
Neill, Sam, 213
Neon Bible, The, 393–95
Neville, Sarah, 190
New Leaf, A, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369
Newton, Thandie, 253
Newton Boys, The, 175, 178n.3, 293
New Women, 172, 173
Nicholls, Allan, 93
Nichols, Mike, 366, 367–68
Nicholson, Jack, 265
Night in the City, 173
Nightjohn, 285, 286–90
Night of the Hunter, The, 396
99 River Street, 138
Ni Zhen, 55
Nolte, Nick, 78–79
No President, 232
Normal Love, 232
Norôit, 168
Norris, Frank, 8, 9–10
North by Northwest, 27, 28
North on Evers, 115
Nostalghia, 203
Nostalgia, 116
Nostromo, 51
notte, La, 133
Nouvelle vague, 64
Nowicki, Tom, 289
Nykvist, Sven, 213
Nyman, Lena, 213

Oates, Warren, 353
Obsession, 295
O'Connell, Arthur, 323
O'Connor, Donald, 197
O'Connor, Frances, 274
O'Connor, Kevin, 356
Odilon Redon, 191
Of Great Events and Ordinary People, 245
Ogier, Bulle, 91, 166
Olmi, Ermanno, 285
olvidados, Los, 258
On Dangerous Ground, 335

One Day in the Life of Andre Arsenevich, 201–2
One Fine Day, 62
One Hundred Years of Japanese Cinema, 212
On Top of the Whale, 240–41, 247
Open City, 21
Operai, contadini, 405
Ophélia, 58
Ordet, 95, 96, 98, 100, 208
Oshima, Nagisa, 175, 212, 213, 315
Osment, Haley Joel, 274, 278
Other Side of the Wind, The, 379, 384
Othon, 124
Out of Sight, 75
Out of the Past, 143
Out 1: Spectre, 91, 195, 373
Overbey, David, 14
Ozu, Yasujiro, 13, 34, 146–51, 394

Padgett, Lewis, 217
Paint Your Wagon, 205, 207–8
Palance, Jack, 179, 180
Palomita blanca, 244
Panahi, Jafar, 283, 339
Parade, 20
Paradjanov, Sergei, 234
Paris Belongs to Us (*Paris nous appartient*), 194, 328
Park, Steve, 157
Parker, Alan, 211
Parking, 37
Partner, 251, 306
Party Girl, 335, 337
Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 122
Passion of Joan of Arc, The, 95
pasticciaccio, Il (Gadda), 119
Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, 352, 354
Paths of Glory, 265, 266, 268
Patterson, Albert, 138, 139, 141
Patterson, John, 139–40, 142, 143
Patterson, Patricia, 297, 300
Paulina s'en va, 63
Paulsen, Gary, 287, 289
Peach Girl, The, 172
Peau d'âne, 37
Peck, Bob, 244
Peddler, The, 282
Peel, Dave, 92
Peeping Tom, 13
Peer Gynt, 16
Peggy and Fred in Hell, 317
Péguy, Charles, 123
Penn, Sean, 78
Pennington, Michael, 202
Peranson, Mark, 120
Pereira dos Santos, Nelson, 213
Perez, Gilberto, 131–32, 135
Perrey, Mireille, 35
Perrin, Jacques, 225
Persistence of Vision, 237
Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies, A, 213
Phelps, Donald, 322
Phenix City Story, 136–45
Philipe, Gérard, 38
Philips Radio, 39
Phillips, John, 82
Phillips, Tom, 244
Piano, The, 98
Piccoli, Michel, 106, 179, 180, 184, 214, 226
Pick, Zuzana M., 244
Pickpocket, 301
Pickup on South Street, 30, 361–62
Pidgeon, Walter, 329
Pied Piper, The, 37
Pierrot le fou, 306
Piesiewicz, Krzysztof, 152, 153
Pinocchio, 276
Pirandello, Luigi, 76
Pisier, Marie-France, 91, 106
Pitts, ZaSu, 7, 8, 178n.3
Platform, 191
Platoon, 78
Playtime, 20, 22, 23, 24, 29, 91, 223, 330
Poh, Richard, 174
Poirier, Richard, 353
Poitier, Sidney, 144, 255
Pollack, Sydney, 263

Pollet, Jean-Daniel, 182, 183
Popov, Sergei, 45
Portal, Michel, 38
Portnow, Richard, 221
Post Concussion, 130
Postlethwaite, Pete, 386
Potemkin, 187
Potter, Dennis, 389–90
Poupaud, Melvil, 245
Powell, Michael, 13
Preminger, Otto, 205, 207, 270, 326–33, 366
Prentiss, Ann, 91
Presents, 317
Presley, Elvis, 341
Presnell, Harve, 155
Pretty Woman, 302–5
Prévert, Jacques, 38
Pride, Ray, 99
Professor Taranne, La, 243
promesse, La, 69, 70
Protazanov, Yakov, 192
Proust, Marcel, 105–12
Pryor, Richard, 275
Przygodda, Peter, 337
Psycho, 13
Pudovkin, Vsevolod, 39, 77–78, 374
Puppet Master, The, 349
Pynchon, Thomas, 187

Queen Kelly, 7, 13
Que la bête meure, 37
Que Viva Mexico, 370
Quiet American, The, 182

Rafferty, Terrence, 99–100
Raging Bull, 295
Rain, 39
Raines, Cristina, 93
Raise the Red Lantern, 54, 55
Raising Arizona, 154, 158
Rameau's Nephew . . ., 317
Rancho Notorious, 13
Rand, Ayn, 375
Randall, Tony, 311
Raphael, Frederic, 262
Rappaport, Mark, 204–9, 392
Rashomon, 217
Rashomon and Other Stories (Akutagawa), 216, 217
Rauch, Andreas von, 126
Ray, Nicholas, 334–37, 342
Ray, Susan, 336–37
Rear Window, 26–31
Rebel Without a Cause, 335, 336, 342–43
Redgrave, Michael, 182
Redgrave, Vanessa, 204
Régime sans pain, 236–37
région centrale, La, 317
Reinhardt, Max, 327
Reitz, Edgar, 211
Remembrance of Things Past (Proust), 105–12
Remsen, Bert, 93
Rendell, Ruth, 58, 60
Reno, Jean, 131
Renoir, Jean, 195
Reservoir Dogs, 64
Resnais, Alain, 34–35, 38, 386
Return to Salem's Lot, A, 357
Reyes, Francisco, 244
Reynaud, Bérénice, 171, 172
Riambau, Esteve, 377
Riberolles, Jacques, 226
Richard, Nathalie, 166, 194, 197
Richards, David, 205
Richardson, Marie, 263
Richardson, Tony, 207
Ritt, Martin, 201
Ritter, Thelma, 30
River of No Return, 330
Rivette, Jacques, 58, 62–63, 76, 91, 168, 194–98, 266, 307, 328, 329
Rivière, Julien, 63
RKO 281, 5
Road to Perdition, 324–25
Robards, Sam, 274
Robbe-Grillet, Alain, 106
Robbins, Tim, 5
Roberts, Julia, 302

Rochemont, Louis de, 137
Rock Hudson's Home Movies, 204, 205, 209
Rock-a-Bye Baby, 311–12
Rohmer, Eric, 31, 58
Romero, George, 278
Rongione, Fabrizio, 69
Rooney, Mickey, 231, 332
Rope, 29, 58
Rose, Reginald, 323
Rose Hobart, 231
Rosetta, 67–71, 121
Rossellini, Roberto, 182, 327
Rossi-Stuart, Kim, 134
Rouch, Jean, 39, 327
Rowlands, Gena, 394, 396
Royal Scandal, A, 328
Ruan Lingyu, 171, 172–74, 175–77, 212
Rubin, Martin, 199
Rudrud, Kristin, 155
Ruiz, Raúl, 40, 43, 105–12, 236–47
Run of the Arrow, 361
rupture, La, 58
Russian Idea, The, 211
Ryan, Robert, 323
Rydell, Mark, 87

Sabiston, Bob, 291, 294
Sacrifice, The, 200, 203
Saint, Eva Marie, 326
Saint Joan, 205, 326
Sakamoto, Ryuichi, 315
samourai, Le, 220, 222
Sampson, Caleb, 103
Sans soleil, 41
Sarris, Andrew, 23, 100, 310–11
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 301
Sastre, Ines, 134
Sátántangó, 48–52, 76
Saturday Night Fever, 273
Savage Innocents, The, 334, 336
Saving Private Ryan, 75, 79, 272
Scene of the Crime, 65
Scharres, Barbara, 340
Schefer, Jean-Louis, 241
Schell, Jonathan, 47
Schickel, Richard, 262
Schindler's List, 278, 279n.1
Schlöndorff, Volker, 105
Schmidlin, Rick, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11
Schnitzler, Arthur, 262, 264
Schoenberg, Arnold, 124
Schotté, Emmanuel, 121
Schrader, Paul, 295, 298–99, 300, 301
Schuck, John, 83
Scorsese, Martin, 184, 268, 295–301
Scotch Tape, 231, 233
Scott, Zachary, 258, 260
Scruton, Roger, 132
Seacat, Sandra, 366
Sea of Fragrant Snow, The, 173
Searchers, The, 301
Seberg, Jean, 181, 204–9, 326
Seed, David, 354
Segal, George, 91
Sekiguchi, Yusuke, 314
Sellers, Peter, 106, 266
Selyanov, Sergei, 211
Selznick, David O., 28
Seven Capital Sins, The, 32
Seventh Victim, The, 28–29
Shadoian, Jack, 138, 139, 140, 144–45n.1
Shattered Image, 107
Shattuck, Roger, 108
Shaw, Bob, 273
Shaw, Vinessa, 263
Shchors, 400
Sheldon, Jack, 88
Shelley, Mary, 216
Sheltering Sky, 252
Shepherd, Cybill, 296
Shining, The, 262, 265, 266, 268, 269
Shock Corridor, 360, 361
Shoot the Piano Player, 37, 64
Short Film About Killing, A, 157–58
Shotwell, Phyllis, 84
Silence of the Lambs, The, 301
Silva, Henry, 219, 221
Simmons, Jean, 197, 326
Sims, Jerry, 233

Siodmak, Robert, 202
Sirk, Douglas, 96, 144, 389
Sitney, P. Adams, 233
Skarsgard, Stellan, 98
Skerritt, Tom, 86
Skidoo, 326, 331, 332
Skolimowski, Jerzy, 307
Slacker, 291, 293
Slightly Pregnant Man, The, 37
Small Soldiers, 78
Smith, Jack, 191, 230–35
Snow, Michael, 317–18
Soderbergh, Steven, 75, 294, 393
Sokurov, Alexander, 230
Solaris, 200, 201, 278
Solntseva, Julia, 403–4
Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, 202
Some Call It Loving, 269
Some Came Running, 183
Sontag, Susan, 180, 232, 234
Sound and the Fury, The (Faulkner), 51, 63
Spanish Earth, The, 39
Spider's Stratagem, The, 251, 252
Spielberg, Steven, 75, 271–79
Spigland, Ethan, 237, 246
Spring Dream in the Old Capital, 173, 176
Stahl-Nachbaur, Ernst, 15
Stalker, 199, 200
Star Is Born, A, 390
State of Things, The, 167, 357
Stealing Beauty, 252
Steel Helmet, The, 360, 361
Steiger, Rod, 361
Stein, Franz, 15
Stéphane, Nicole, 105
Sternberg, Josef von, 13, 232, 234
Sterritt, David, 238–39
Stevenson, Adlai, 360
Stewart, Alexandra, 201–2
Stewart, James, 26, 322, 325
Stockhausen, Karlheinz, 147
Stormare, Peter, 155, 156
strada, La, 96
Strangers on a Train, 28
Straub, Jean-Marie, 50, 116, 123–29, 405
Streetcar Named Desire, A, 396
Strick, Joseph, 111
Stroheim, Erich von, 3–12, 70, 178n.3, 364
SubUrbia, 293
Such Good Friends, 331, 332, 333, 366
Sulzberger, L. S., 126
Summer at Grandpa's, A, 347, 349
Sunrise, 13, 76
Sutherland, Donald, 82
Suzuki, Seijun, 220, 222n.1
Swann in Love, 105
Szabo, Laszlo, 197
Szechuan Concubine, The, 54

table tournante, La, 37
Tabu, 76, 79
Taipei Story, A, 339, 342, 343
Takeshi Kitano the Unforeseeable, 314
Talented Mr. Ripley, The, 134
Tale of the Wind, A, 38–42
Tales from the Gimli Hospital, 187, 188, 190, 191
Tales of an Island, 281
Tape, 293
Tarantino, Michael, 88
Tarantino, Quentin, 64, 220
Tarkovsky, Andrei, 51, 199–203, 278, 314
Tarkovsky, Larissa, 200
Tarr, Béla, 48–52, 76
Tartalia, Jerry, 231, 232
Tashlin, Frank, 28, 306–12, 317
Taste of Cherry, 114, 280, 339
Tati, Jacques, 19–25, 29, 91, 202, 223, 315, 330
Tatischeff, Sophie, 21, 22
Tavernier, Bertrand, 64
Taxi Driver, 295–301
Taylor, James, 353
Taylor, Robert, 337
Tchalgadjieff, Stéphane, 132
Téchiné, André, 62–66, 228
Tell Me That You Love Me, June Moon,

331, 332
Temptress Moon, 113, 117
Teo, Stephen, 177, 342
Teorema, 122
Terrorizers, The, 340, 343
Terry and the Pirates, 28
Tesson, Charles, 173, 175–76
Testament of Dr. Mabuse, The, 14
Testament of Orpheus, 40, 41
Testing Democracy, 281
Tewkesbury, Joan, 92
That Awful Mess on Via Merulana (Gadda), 119
That Bowling Alley on the Tiber: Tales of a Director (Antonioni), 132–33, 134
That Day on the Beach, 343
That Lady in Ermine, 328
There Was a Father, 150
Thewlis, David, 253, 344
They Live by Night, 335
Thieves, 62–66
Thieves Like Us, 84, 85, 86
Thin Blue Line, The, 102
Thin Red Line, The, 75–79, 256
Thirteenth Letter, The, 327
This Man Must Die, 58
Thomas, François, 377
Thomas, Jake, 274
Thomson, David, 14, 39, 376, 378–79, 381–83
Thornton, Leslie, 317
Thorpe, Richard, 245
Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse, The, 18, 59
Three Lives and Only One Death, 237, 238, 239, 243
Three Modern Women, 173
Threepenny Opera, The, 15, 71
Tian Zhuangzhuang, 40, 54
Tierney, Gene, 326, 327, 328
Tiger of Eschnapur, The, 182
Tih Minh, 165, 166
Time Regained, 105–12
Time to Live and a Time to Die, A, 339, 349
To Catch a Thief, 27
Todeschini, Bruno, 196, 197
Tokyo Story, 147, 149–50
Toles, George, 188
Toll, John, 75, 79
Tolliver, Moses, 115, 116–17
Tolstoy, Leo, 78
Tomlin, Lily, 92
Tone, Franchot, 329
Too Early, Too Late, 125
Toole, John Kennedy, 393–95
Tormey, John, 218
To Sleep with Anger, 285–86, 289
Touch of Evil, 3, 4, 6, 10–11, 12n.1, 371
Tourneur, Jacques, 13, 29
Tous les nuages sont des horloges, 247
Toussaint, Lorraine, 288
Traffic (Soderbergh), 193n.2
Traffic (Tati), 20, 23
Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man, The, 251
Traumnovelle (Schnitzler), 262–63
Traveling avant, 64
Travolta, John, 79, 273
Traywick, Joel Thomas, 289
Treasure Island, 243, 247
Tree Grows in Brooklyn, A, 335
Tree of Wooden Clogs, The, 285
Tregenza, Rob, 75–76
Trial, The, 267, 268
Tristano, Lennie, 80
Trois places pour le 26, 37
Trouble with Harry, The, 27
Truffaut, François, 37, 58, 64, 105, 167, 210–11, 287
Tsai Ming-liang, 146
Tsunetomo, Yamamoto, 216
Tuckfield, Christopher, 247
Tullier, Philippe, 121
Turner, Nat, 290
Turpin, Ben, 24
TV Dante, A: Cantos 9–14, 239, 244
Twilight of the Ice Nymphs, 191
Two-Lane Blacktop, 352, 353, 354
Two Weeks in Another Town, 183
2001: A Space Odyssey, 266, 269, 271, 272, 274
2 x 50 Years of French Cinema, 213–15

Tyner, McCoy, 256
Typically British, 210

Ullmann, Liv, 213
Ulmer, Edgar G., 243
Ulrich, Skeet, 178n.3
Ulysses, 111
Umbrellas of Cherbourg, The, 32–37, 225, 227, 228
Uncommon Senses, 114–15
Untouchables, The, 187
Up Down Fragile, 64, 76, 194–98
Urga, 135
Urusevsky, Sergei, 371
Utopia, 247

Vadim, Roger, 207
Vallée, Maine, 23
vampires, Les, 164, 165–66, 169
Vanishing Point, 245
Varda, Agnès, 37, 38, 224
Vatnsdal, Caelum, 191
Venom and Eternity, 169
Vernon, Anne, 36
Vernon, Howard, 126
Vernon, Florida, 102
Vertigo, 26
Vessey, Tricia, 218
Viaggio in Italia, 327
Vidal, René, 166–67, 168, 169
Vidor, King, 13
Vierny, Sacha, 240
Vig, Mihaly, 51
Viridiana, 258
Visconti, Luchino, 360
Vitti, Monica, 181
Vivre sa vie, 179, 180
Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr., 237, 346
von Trier, Lars, 95–100, 213
voyage dans la lune, Le, 41

Waking Life, 291–94
Walker, 351, 352, 355
Walking Down Broadway, 7
Walking Tall, 136, 138, 144
Walsh, Angela, 386
Walsh, Joseph, 80–81
Wang Ji, 56
Wang Zhiwen, 56
Warhol, Andy, 308, 310, 317
Warshow, Robert, 374–75
Watson, Emily, 95, 96, 100
Watson, Ian, 273
Wavelength, 318
Wayne, John, 301
Way to Santiago, The, 6
Weaver, William, 119
Webb, Clifton, 326
We Can't Go Home Again, 336
Weinberg, Herman G., 4
Weis, Don, 197
Weller, Peter, 131
Welles, Gwen, 81, 91, 93
Welles, Orson, 3–5, 6–7, 10, 14, 55, 57, 107, 119, 233, 239, 267–68, 365, 370, 371, 376–85
Wells, Kitty, 233
Wenders, Wim, 97, 132, 134, 167, 337
Wenicke, Otto, 17
Weston, Jack, 367
When It Rains, 286
Where Is the Friend's House?, 321
Whirlpool, 326, 327
Whitaker, Forest, 216, 222
White, Edmund, 107
White Balloon, The, 339
White Dog, 363
Whytock, Grant, 10
Widmark, Richard, 361
Wiggins, Wiley, 291–92, 293, 294
Wilbur, Crane, 143
Wilder, Billy, 100, 294
Wild Grass, 173, 176
Wild Reeds, 63
Williams, Dean, 387
Williams, John T., 88
Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter, 310–11
Wilmington, Michael, 75
Wilson, Dennis, 353
Wilson, Edmund, 105, 106

Wilson, Robert, 234
Wind Across the Everglades, 334
Wind Will Carry Us, The, 219
Wings of the Dove, The, 24
Woman Is a Woman, A, 197–98
Wood, Natalie, 301
Wood, Robin, 59, 122, 299, 322, 337
Woodberry, Billy, 115, 285
Woolrich, Cornell, 27
Wright, Frank Lloyd, 334
Wu Nien-jen, 347–48
Wurlitzer, Rudy, 351–56
Wynn, Keenan, 93

Yamiguchi, Yoshiko, 233
Yang, Edward, 338–45, 346
Yeats, William Butler, 274, 278–79
Yellow Submarine, 292
Yevtushenko, Yevgeny, 371
Yordan, Philip, 335
York, Kathleen, 288
York, Susannah, 83, 85
Young, Terence, 362
Young Girls of Rochefort, The, 33, 36, 37, 223–29
Young Girls Turn 25, The, 224
Young One, The, 257–61
Yutkevich, Sergei, 371

Zahedi, Caveh, 294
Zentropa, 96
Zhang Damin, 173
Zhang Huichong, 174
Zhang Yimou, 54
Zheng Nianping, 55
Zorn, John, 242
Zvenigora, 400